

'New Dance Festival '04' Showcases Wealth Of Talent

James Madison University's ninth annual New Dance Festival '04 was a memorable production. The festival is designed to be "a showcase for the professional work of the JMU Dance Program faculty and their collaborators." To this end, a guest company is usually invited, and works by other outside choreographers are commissioned and performed. This year's guest was Jane Franklin and her dancers.

Ms. Franklin is an elegant dancer who has been working in the modern dance idiom for more than a quarter century. I happened to live in Boulder, Colorado, 25 years ago, where I had a chance to see Jane as a young teacher and performer. In the 1990s, when I moved to Washington, D.C., there she was again, still enlarging her craft. So it was gratifying to see her once more, in Harrisonburg, presenting new work that is certainly among her strongest to date.

The program opened with "Whisper," a solo choreographed and performed by Jane. A video slide show of trees formed the backdrop for this dance, which combined a practiced central section with improvisation. Subtlety was the message here; the spare musical soundtrack completed the impression of Zen-like minimalism.

Next up, "Blinder's Dive" featured JMU faculty members Cynthia Thompson and Kate Trammel in a commissioned work created for them by New York choreographer Aviva Geismar. This piece was about the internal motivations that keep people going, despite life's travails. Thompson and Trammell moved through a series of somber evolutions, often bearing each other's weight or building up opposing stresses with arms, legs and torsos. This piece was ennobled by its otherworldly score, a choral work by Ivan Ziporyn. Sounding like a Gregorian chant from some parallel dimension, the music lent an aura of spiritual majesty to the dance.

"Blue Moon," also by Franklin, explored the balance of light and dark through the moon's phases. Danced by seven members of Franklin's troop to music by John Cage, the piece set a calm, mysterious tone. In fact, this same tone of minimalist abstraction, loosely pervading the evening's entire first half, extended into the intermission. That's when the show shifted out onto the sculpture garden of Duke Hall for a work that Jane set on a master class of JMU student dancers. "Take a Deep Breath" was pleasing for both its restrained exuberance and for taking full advantage of a large dramatic space. Groups of dancers in white migrated unpredictably across the lawn, moving in and out of the light.

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The tone changed after the intermission. JMU dance teacher Shane O'Hara reprised his performance of Daniel Nagrin's "Wordgame, a Cartoon." The piece, created in 1968 to lampoon political posturing in time of war, was deemed by O'Hara to be relevant again for today. "Different time, different war ... some things never change," says O'Hara. The work consists of a tape collage and a precise series of postures and mime sequences by the dancer. The tape collage loops through several times, and interesting dissonances are created as the movements and sound effects get out of phase, in the middle. O'Hara's talents for comic gesture and topical satire combine perfectly in this work.

Next up, JMU faculty member Suzanne Miller-Corso's "Cry Me a River" made what was, ironically, the evening's most radical departure. Her jazz-dance interpretation of the old tune was choreographed by Alan Arnett. After five resolutely modern works, this viscerally rhythmic, stylish piece was something of a palate cleanser.

The evening's finale was a major work by Franklin's company called "In the Blink of an Eye." This study in layering, designed to amplify a sense of dread, featured the metaphor of a small child in peril. Imagine finding your two-year-old toddler playing in the median strip of Interstate 81; such was the image built up by the video background, dancers and shadows. Franklin stopped short of explicating a tragedy, here, but the intent was dark, nevertheless. A polished, nuanced work, this was as good as anything of hers I have ever seen.

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