

Mordine & Company Fall Engagement 2013

Mordine & Company Write an Unfinished Symphony at the Dance Center

By Lauren Warnecke

The beginning of Mordine & Company's Fall engagement at the Dance Center (their 5th D.C. appearance since 2000) was really awkward. After waiting until 8:12 for doors of the theatre to close, the audience sat uncomfortably silent until 8:14 when Shirley Mordine herself walked in with a microphone. She started giving a curtain speech and was quickly interrupted by banging on the theatre door. There was a filler comment about out-of-town guests, and then a small parade of dancers, musicians, and two large muslin banners entered the theatre. Mordine's filler didn't last long enough for the musicians to set up, so again we were faced with a strange and awkward silence. This, apparently, was the beginning to her newest creation: "I haven't gone there...".

A rough start was recovered by the ever-compelling Bryan Saner as the storyteller, whose text weaved a mysterious tale about a traveling circus...or something like that. Saner could have been a tall lanky version of the confusing, tiny man in the red suit from Twin Peaks; like the little man, his diversions were often non-sensical, but the listener felt an inner logic that created a world we perhaps aren't meant to understand.

"I haven't gone there..." is a promising work that came to the live stage half-baked. The passages of dancing are sometimes stunning, and sometimes unsure. The transitions between sections are rough, especially with Saner's live microphone revealing every shuffle and adjustment. The dancers are begrudgingly kept onstage the whole time in posed tableaux - corps de ballet style. Perhaps this decision was meant to provide color and framing to the massive Dance Center stage, which was made bigger and starker by pulling the legs back. Instead, they were clearly uncomfortable, not knowing what to do with their faces and trying to be discreet about warming up their feet, scratching, and adjusting on their barstools while waiting to dance.

There were plenty of enjoyable moments too, most memorably the "Intermission" in which Saner's command of the stage was accompanied by a sometimes literal, always quite clever, interpretive dance. The underutilized white banners came to play toward the end to create compelling metamorphoses of a dancer's silhouette. Mordine's movement (created in collaboration with the dancers) connected beautifully with a tempered Mucca Pazza score, whose arrangements included a lovely dancer/cowbell duet, banjo and accordion harmonies, and a vacuum hose a la Ace of Base. "I haven't gone there..." displayed hints of greatness that reminded the viewer how important Shirley Mordine is to the Chicago Dance Community, and that, 44 years after inception, Mordine and her Company still have something to say. Given another month in the studio, this piece will eventually become a gem.

The second piece, "All at Once/Acts of Renewal" was fully cooked and has been seen on a number of

occasions through the past season. Visiting from D.C. to rejoin the cast, Katie Sopoci Drake came bursting out of the wings in a sports bra and white jeggings with a powerful opening that completely justified the trip across country. "All at Once..." shows off the group's capacity for strong ensemble dancing, while a series of unnecessary back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back solos at the end of the piece appeared more like a choreographic exercise. Shawn Decker's musical score, interwoven with the sounds of a dance rehearsal and Mordine's voice giving directions, elicited an acute sense of nostalgia to an audience largely made up of long time Dance Center faculty and alumni. The voice of Shirley Mordine in rehearsal is one that has permeated the lives of thousands of dancers who have crossed her path, myself included. Hearing it again in this context was a treat I won't soon forget.

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Mordine & Company Dance Theater's "I haven't gone there..." and "All at Once/Acts of Renewal" continues through Saturday at the Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago (1306 S. Michigan Ave). For tickets or more information, visit colum.edu/dance.