

Expressive Power of Dance

--A Review of Spring Student Concert

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The Margaret H'Doubler Performance Space, Lathrop Hall, University of Wisconsin-Madison presented the Spring Student Concert on April 10th, 2003. Students presenting works included seniors Bethany Alwa, Jordan Buck, Darcy Cochrane, Joana DaCosta, Karen Heusinger, Shannon Kao, Emily Plotkin, and Amy Ward. A main theme throughout this concert was to explore how dance can express emotional struggles and feelings of intimacy and passion. Different choreographers approached this question differently. Although not every piece was satisfying, there were some pleasing commonalities among the works: imagination, creativity, dedication, and commitment. It's exciting to see these choreographers tackle states of the human condition and watch how they develop their distinctive voices. Various design elements such as costumes, lighting, sets and props were carefully explored. In *Lavando a Alma*, Joana DaCosta used four dancers as a background, walking across the far-up stage. Together with red light shining on them from the side stage, a vivid scene was drawn of women working peacefully and playfully along a river. Another example is Karen Heusinger's *Fervency*, where the lighting design by Eli Wieczorek defined the space of the stage and the regrouping of the dancers. Furthermore, good techniques and commitment demonstrated by the dancers contributed positively to the works, making them a feast for the eyes.

Among these, three solos especially caught my interest, namely, Darcy Cochrane's *Strings*, Amy Ward's *Interlude # 2*, and Shannon Kao's *Discontented Redemption*. Each of these pieces tried to express a negative mood or emotional struggles of individuals, yet they are distinct from one another in the languages exploited.

In *Strings*, Darcy Cochrane intended to explore how a woman is affected by controlling and negative personalities. The videography done by Cochrane and Santiago Soto strongly enhanced the main theme. It showed the face of a Japanese geisha, who was numbly and passively being painted, symbolizing a puppet. Cochrane used Marionette-like movements as a metaphor for the feeling of being manipulated. She also exploited monologue in this piece. However, my general impression of this piece is one of obtuseness and lack of focus. Several factors contributed to this.

First, the movements seemed obtuse in respect to the theme, due to inconsistency in the use of Marionette-like movements. Furthermore, the choreographer failed to dig deeper than the mere surface, relinquishing the exploration of a more fundamental and interesting part: Is the woman aware she's being manipulated? How does she respond to such negative feelings? Is she sad, angry, or even desperate? Second, the lighting design failed to make the dancer the focus of the stage. As a consequence, the video background was sometimes distracting. Third, although soliloquy can sometimes help in expressing the subject, unfortunately, the voice of the dancer was buried in the music.

In contrast to *Strings*, Amy Ward's solo *Interlude #2 (Fearscape)* was easier to understand. She explored "the personal struggle of a woman with an addiction that consumes every aspect of her life". And she succeeded. Danced to intense noises

(designed by Daniel Cashin), Amy limited her movements to the corner of the stage centered by a table. The table served as a tool to express hiding, pain and addiction. Her movements were characterized by abruptness. Just like the reoccurrence of a theme in a sonata, a sequence of movements starting from upper body, followed by falling under the table, then manipulating the table, and ending with the return to the starting point was repeated several times with variations. Such repetition emphasized the subjects of “addiction” and “being trapped”. The interaction with the table was interesting, the table symbolizing pressure and the source of the pain. The accompaniment of noises exaggerated the atmosphere of fear. Amy did a good acting job as well, with the fear being clearly written in her facial expression and movements. However, a lack of techniques shortened the aesthetic aspect of this piece. I think a major characteristic distinguishing dance from theater is that dance intensively explores body movements to create a visual sensation. In this work, the line between theater and dance blurred. It was an interesting experiment to combine acting with dancing, yet it was a pity that the realm of dance was not fully exploited.

My most favorite piece was Shannon Kao’s *Discontented Redemption*. In this piece, Shannon exhibited both sensitivity and creativity as a choreographer and pleasing techniques as a dancer. Moving adroitly from mechanical dips and bends to a flexible body, Shannon presented a visceral sense of weight and a lovely quality of grace. “Through movement, I am trying to create a picture of someone who feels a great deal of remorse and looks for an emotional pathway to healing and self-forgiveness.”, was Shannon’s comment on her piece. There was no doubt that she satisfyingly accomplished

this goal. *Discontented Redemption* was both visually and auditorily pleasing, touching and resonating. Let us closely examine how the theme was successfully constructed.

First, there were clear motifs and structural form in this choreography. The story began when sleep was interrupted by nagging thoughts. A sequence of variations of swings from side to side on the floor indicated insomnia. The feeling of remorse was depicted by a series of physically challenging movements expressing disgust of her body. With the tempo of movements evolving from slow to fast, and the coverage of the space increasing, Shannon convincingly developed a strong feeling and image. The transition from self-blaming to self-healing followed a natural path: to face one's bitterness directly and frankly is the starting point of healing. After letting out all those negative feelings, the calmness of the soul was regained and symbolically, sleep was peacefully resumed.

Second, with passion and well-trained modern techniques, Shannon's performance was truly engaging and stimulating. Her movements demonstrated a mix of athletic prowess and physical grace, controlled strength and emotionalism. Through her movements, Shannon vividly depicted the feelings of remorse and bitterness.

Last but not least, the music/sound, carefully chosen and designed, strongly enhanced the expressiveness of the work. Both at the beginning and the end, sounds imitating the noise from neighbors were used, creating a realistic setting. At the beginning, it was the trigger to the nagging thoughts, while at the end it became a lullaby for a peaceful mind. "Dirty Three's" touching music "Lullaby for Christie" accompanied the major part of this work. It separated the character from the outside world, creating a space for her to listen to her heart.

Dancing was originally a way to better communicate by exaggerating the body gestures. However, as dancing developed into a refined art form, it tends to be extremely aesthetic; to that end, ballet is a good example. The choreographer's or the dancer's character and feeling as an individual get buried in the strict format. In the evolution in painting, modern styles try to emphasize individual experience, and to break the confinement imposed by format. Analogously, modern dance pushes dance as an art form back towards nature. Emphasizing awareness, sensation and momentum of body movements, modern dance is expressive in nature. However, the belief that such expressive power comes at the cost of aesthetics is a myth. In my opinion, they complement and benefit from each other. The lack of either dooms a great piece. Good techniques and control not only contribute to the power of expressiveness of modern dance, but also naturally create a beauty by body movements.

To summarize, this evening of student's showcases was a good exploration for the young artists along the lines of expressive power of dance and the application of techniques. On the negative side, there were pieces that showed adorable techniques and formation, like *Fervercy* and *Tripolarity* (Jordan Buck), yet without a clear subject, they looked like a pretty doll without a soul. There were pieces with a great idea to begin with, yet the lack of techniques as a foundation turned them into a monotone dogma, hampered their power of communicating with the audience. *String* and *Interlude #2* fell into this category. From the positive perspective, some pieces demonstrated a successful combination of both, like *Lavando a Alma* and *Discontented Redemption*. Not only were they a feast for the eyes, but they also touched the heart.