

Atlas Performing Arts Center, Washington DC; January 4, 2014

Carmel Morgan

Dance fans in DC know that Dance Place, the longtime bedrock of contemporary dance in Washington, is presently undergoing a transformation. Dance Place's studio and performance space is being expanded and renovated. While these exciting changes are ongoing, shows and classes must go on. Therefore, different venues across the city are playing host to Dance Place's usual activities. The Atlas Performing Arts Center provided space for a special two-day event – the Modern Moves Festival – featuring 12 local modern dance companies. The performances were sold out, a testament to the strong support for contemporary dance in the DC area.

Although the need for a performance venue during Dance Place's major upgrades spurred the festival at the Atlas, I hope to see not only more contemporary dance at the Atlas, but also a repeat of the festival at the new and improved Dance Place. It was fantastic to be able to see so many DC-based modern dance companies in back-to-back performances. It would be a shame not to attempt the festival again, especially when the shows were sold out. Not only did the audience benefit from the opportunity to see so many contemporary dance companies at once, but I'm guessing the companies also benefitted from working closely with each other. I'd also guess that the companies will see a boost in attendance at future performances due to this joint exposure.



On a chilly Saturday night, I attended the first evening of the festival, which showcased six local dance companies: alight dance theater, Bowen McCauley Dance, Christopher K. Morgan & Artists, Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Company, Daniel Burkholder/The Playground, and Human Landscape Dance. Sunday's afternoon performance also had six DC area companies dancing: Company E, Dance Exchange, Jane Franklin Dance, Naoko Maeshiba/Kibism, Rebollar Dance, and VTDance/Vincent E. Thomas.

Closing the evening was Christopher K. Morgan's "De-Generate," a piece from 2012. I had also seen this work previously, and I liked it better upon this viewing. When I first saw "De-Generate," which was commissioned by the American University Dance Company, I was uncertain about the use of ping-pong balls. Yes, spoiler alert, ping pong balls play a prominent part in "De-Generate." A whole mess of ping pong balls, in fact, litter the stage. Morgan is an accomplished choreographer, and I worried that rather than being creative, he had grown lazy by relying heavily on gimmicky props like ping pong balls. My worry was compounded by the fact that the opening of "De-Generate" was so extremely lovely sans ping pong balls. The little orbs, I thought at the time, were little more than a distraction. This time, though, I grew fond of the ping pong balls. Maybe it was the luminescent lighting (original lighting design by Jason Arnold, subsequent design by Brian S. Allard)? The balls looked pearly and seemed to glow. I also appreciated the way the balls added aural and visual interest. Furthermore, I began to see the balls as symbols for life's complications. Dancer Tiffanie Carson rounded up countless little balls, but try as she might, a few pesky ones were left behind. As hard as we may try to corral the messiness of life and strive for neatness, some things stay messy! Most of all, I sensed an edge of your seat tension that propelled the work and raised it above merely a dance with cute props. The emotional undercurrent supplied by the more mature dancers in Morgan's company, versus the college dancers, won me over.