

# 'Spiraling' at The Music Center at Strathmore's CityDance Studio Theater by Breena Siegel

Posted on **October 30, 2012** by **Breena Siegel**

"You are half of the performance," Artistic Director Christopher K. Morgan of Christopher K. Morgan & Artists (CKM&A) reminded the audience before his company took the stage for the evening-length program of *Spiraling*. Morgan is a cheerleader for audience engagement and encouraged people to stay after for a post-show talk back. The five-piece performance featured work by Morgan and his company of dancers as well as guest performances from Dance Exchange and CityDance Conservatory.

For a company that only recently celebrated their one-year anniversary in July, CKM&A are already leaving a footprint in D.C. Morgan is compelled to forge relationships within the District evident in his choice to show work alongside promising choreographers like Sarah Levitt of Dance Exchange. "Both CKM&A and Dance Exchange are looking at this as the beginning of a partnership that will explore multiple ways of working together...sharing programs, collaborating, and building community within the greater Metro DC dance community. It's a way for like-minded companies to develop audiences together and pool resources, as well as stimulate each other artistically," shared Morgan.

Morgan's work in *Spiraling*, presented through four pieces, shows a vast range of conceptual beauty through coiled and structured movement that inspires conversation long after you leave the room. The performance opened with *C'est le ton qui fait la chanson*, a piece that was originally commissioned by The Phillips Gallery, for their exhibit *Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard*, which was on view February through May of this year. The translation for the title is "The tone that makes the song." The

company revisited the piece and added more material; the effect feels like an ode to an age of innocence. The dancing evokes nostalgia for a time-period in France inspired by the discovery of new art mediums. The Parisian music of the 1930's and 40's is light and colorful, washed with fluid, playful movements. It was a performance piece that needed to breathe, and I wonder if an open-air backdrop would give it new life.

*C'est le ton qui fait la chanson* was followed by *Brutal Beauty* performed by The CityDance Conservatory Dancers. This contemporary ballet piece was engaging from the start. The all-female cast painted the stage with a blend of contorted and artful motion at times intensified by honeycombed lighting, designed by Brian S. Allard. The piece was succinct and energized, and fitting against the background music of Zoe Keating's agitated cellist sounds. It is a work in development in preparation for the CityDance Conservatory's upcoming project with The Phillips Collection, *Angels, Demons, and Savages*.

*Ground Loss*, also a work-in-progress, choreographed by Resident Artist of Dance Exchange Sarah Levitt, was fourth in the program. This segment of the work, which Levitt refers to as "a blend between theater and dance," features an intergenerational cast of company members Matthew Cumbie and Shula



CKM&A dance Junichi Fukuda from the piece "De-Generate." Photo by Brianne Bland.

Strassfeld as well as Artistic Director of Dance Exchange, Cassie Meador. The piece is character driven and takes us into the world of “Cousin Barbara.” Levitt uses a lot of text in her choreography, and was inspired by a character named “cousin Barbara,” who emerged one day in rehearsal as dancers were sharing ideas. “That character is kind of standing in for some of the bigger questions about what we do when we lose something or when things shift so drastically,” said Levitt. This sense of loss is particularly felt in the beginning of the piece when the lights switch on and off while the dancers change positions.

Also in the program, Morgan revives his celebrated solo-piece, *Rice*, which he originally performed in 2005 in New York. Morgan tells the story as a child of being responsible for making rice for his family. As a Hawaiian this is no simple task. He appears on stage with a 50-pound bag of rice and tank full of water. At first, he lists the various ways cultures use rice, but then delves into a deeper story of what it was like to wash the rice until it ran clear. An effect that left his skin white, which was an experience he relished. We witness Morgan as a child sandwiched between multiple cultures and races and trying to make sense of it all. The piece is more conversational and less dance driven. Morgan’s sincerity as a performing artist and desire to connect with the audience comes through clearly.

*De-Generate*, the final piece in *Spiraling*, is a company premiere initially commissioned by the American University Dance Company. The piece felt exceptionally original and offered a unique experience for the audience to behold dancers navigating a compromised environment. The inspiration for the piece was taken from the idea that as modern day creatures we are overwhelmed by endless amounts of information.

The imagery of *De-Generate* is stunning. It begins with one dancer on stage and two single table tennis balls. The balls land miraculously on either side of the dancer as she peers at them questioningly. All of a sudden hundreds of more balls explode and fill the entire stage creating a sea of rolling white circular objects. Just when two new objects became an obstacle, hundreds become an even bigger question. The dancers multiply and spend the next segment of time carefully gliding and moving amidst the objects. In

the post-show talk back Morgan discussed how the piece is intentionally risky for the dancers.



CKM&A dancer Tiffanie Carson, from “De-Generate.”  
Photo by Brianne Bland.

CKM&A alongside Dance Exchange represent a strong force of dance voices in Washington DC. We are lucky to have these creative bodies in our midst that continue to create work that explores the foundations on which we build society. Not only that, but both companies are concerned with the artist-audience dialogue. I imagine this piece of the experience they offer will only grow as the companies continue to incorporate ways to engage the voice of the audience.

*Spiraling* played on October 27 and 28, 2012 at The Music Center at Strathmore’s CityDance Studio Theater - 5301 Tuckerman Lane, in North Bethesda, MD.