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James Bradley, Elzanne Crause and Mbulelo Ndabeni dance "In the Mirror of Her Mind" in BLUE

Photo credit: Helena Fagan

2014 is almost done and dusted and as part of a series of five columns that reviews the past year of South African theatre, this second "six of the best" list serves as an overview of the best South African dance and physical theatre of the past year. The first column focused on six of eighteen theatre productions that BroadwayWorld will be featuring during this week, with two more columns on plays to come. A further column will also be devoted to musical theatre. For now though - on with the dance! This column also features input from Robin Malan and Steven van Wyk. Malan is the owner-manager of Junkets Publisher, which specialises in new South African plays, including

THE MAGNET THEATRE "MIGRATION" PLAYS, an anthology documenting the work of one of South Africa's foremost physical theatre companies. Van Wyk, the co-founder of Underground Dance Theatre, is currently the resident director and resident choreographer of [THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW](#).

Dance legend [Martha Graham](#) observed, 'Every dance is a kind of fever chart, a graph of the heart.' Nowhere was this seen more clearly than in the Cape Dance Company's magnificent [BLUE](#), which was performed in Cape Town's Artscape Theatre in November. Three ballets by Christopher L. Huggins, "In the Mirror of Her Mind", "Blue" and "Bolero", pushed the company members to new heights, with Robin Malan noting, 'The dancers obviously loved working with him, and they clearly upped their game!' Of the three, "In the Mirror of Her Mind" was my personal favourite, a heart-wrenching *pas de quatre* danced by long-standing company members Elzanne Crause and James Bradley with guest artist Mbulelo Ndabeni and "next generation" Cape Dance Company dancer Mthuthuzeli November. A meditation on identity, love and loss, "In the Mirror of Her Mind" was well served not only by the outstanding technical work by the four dancers, but also by their complete emotional commitment to the piece. It represented the best of everything that the Cape Dance Company has to offer.

The programme of BLUE also featured "The State In-between", created by Mbulelo Ndabeni in collaboration with Simone Muller-Lotz, returning company member Cara-May Marcus's solo work "Obscure Sorrows" and the commissioned piece "Fadeout.Five", choreographed by Belinda Nusser.

Returning from previous seasons was Bradley Shelver's "Scenes", more compelling than ever here, with Cape Dance Company stalwart Louisa Talbot delivering standout work in its 'Quintet +1' movement alongside a breathtaking pas de deux danced by James Bradley and Elzanne Crause to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata". The CDCII Repertory Ensemble danced a new work, which was singled out by Robin Malan: 'Mthuthuzeli November is always a special favourite of mine, so I clearly enjoyed his work, especially his debut piece of

choreography, "Calligraphy".' All in all, BLUE represented Debbie Turner's uncompromising vision for dance in South Africa and was a culmination of twenty years of tenacity and artistry.



"Blue" soloist, Mbulelo Ndabeni

Cape Town City Ballet also celebrated an anniversary this year, having been entertaining balletomanes in the Mother City for 80 years. In a season that included SWAN LAKE, BALLET BEAUTIFUL, THUMBELINA and CINDERELLA, the Cape Town City Ballet presentation that turned heads was the triple bill of three John Neumeier ballets that made up SPRING AND FALL. Steven van Wyk discussed this groundbreaking production for the company: 'These works breathed new life into Cape Town City Ballet's repertoire, but none more so than Neumeier's brutal "Rite of Spring"'. Gone were the traditional, graceful lines, patterns and formations that we associate with the company, replaced with stark, haunting images that burned into your retina, such was the power of their impact. The vocabulary utilised pedestrian movement and contemporary dance, and striking arrangements of large groups of dancers for maximum effect. Dramatic lighting and use of projection over the dancer's bodies contributed to the richness and power of the production. Dancers who audiences have never seen featured before were used in prominent roles, such as Sarah-Lee Chapman as the sacrifice - a move that not only showcased the stronger contemporary dancers within the company, but also added a palpable, electric sense of the unexpected. SPRING AND FALL was the most superior production I have seen from CTCB in my lifetime, and I hope they will continue to make brave, bold programming choices like this.'



"Le Sacre du Printemps" from Cape Town City Ballet's SPRING AND FALL

Robin Malan also selected SPRING AND FALL as one of his dance highlights of the year, focusing his attention on one of the other ballets in the programme: "Le Sacre" is a masterful work on Stravinsky's music. It was great to see Milwhynne Williams so well used, and taking on the role of lead soloist with such authority. We haven't seen ballet like this for a long time."

Underground Dance Theatre premiered their first full-length piece, [BOK](#), at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown this year, also running at the Magnet Theatre in Cape Town.

Choreographed by Steven van Wyk, Cilna Katzke and Kristina Johnstone, BOK took its inspiration from Vaslav Nijinsky's "Afternoon of a Faun" with the three choreographers exploring the boundaries between man, animal and spirit. Structured as a triptych, BOK also explored the manner in which people use animals within the context of rituals to access the spiritual world. In Grahamstown, BOK was danced by Henk Opperman, William Constable, Aviwe November and Martin Harding, with Kopano Maroga taking over Harding's track for the Cape Town run. BOK was one of Robin Malan's picks of 2014, describing its closing moments as follows: "The final image is stunning: the other three dancers drape around Henk Opperman's head a kind of bead curtain, weirdly reminiscent of a traditional African bridal face-veil, but as long as he is tall. He swirls round and round, giving a wonderful dervish-maypole-moSotho-hat image; and then concludes by swishing the whole thing around his neck at lethal speed, then... black-out! A beautiful piece."

One of Underground Dance Theatre's earliest collaborators - she choreographed "Keepsake" in the company's award-winning KEEPSAKE MINUS THREE - was 2014's Standard Bank Young Artist Award Winner for Dance, Nicola Elliott. BRUISING, the work that Elliott choreograph-directed on Vishanthi Arumugam, Athena Mazarakis, Alan Parker and Jori Snell for the National Arts Festival was one of her erstwhile associate Steven van Wyk's picks of the year. 'The work showed remarkable maturity and restraint in the minimalist way it allowed itself to unfold,' he said. 'And unfolding is apt, since all the elements of the work seemed to unfold and come apart, from the surface of the stage which was inverted tiny blocks at a time reveal a mirrored underside, to what appeared to be the backcloth of the stage space which dropped to reveal a huge basketball court area into which the performers ventured.'

Meticulous in her approach to exploring how the body communicates experience, Elliott's work looked thematically at the notion of love, while also deconstructing the medium of dance theatre itself. Van Wyk continues, 'Elliott tested our patience with some sections unfolding frustratingly slowly, in what felt like watching an astronaut trying to carry out a precise task in an anti-gravity chamber. The payoff of watching these tasks was immense, as Elliott and her established, grounded cast guided us to a point that seemed to expand existentially and implode our experience. The image that best summed up this inscrutable feeling was the moment at which the cast hugged a giant inflatable ball, which then lifted into the air and floated for a while before bouncing in slow motion. With typical dry wit, Elliott had the cast attempt to throw the giant ball into a regular-sized basketball hoop... and for a second, we thought they might succeed.' BRUISING featured stage and costume design by Illka Louw, with lighting by Wolf Britz.

The penultimate show in this column was a pick of Robin Malan's: THE ARCHITECTURE OF TEARS by fledgling Cape Town based company Figure of 8 (FO8). FO8's Grant Van Ster and Shaun Oelf collaborated with dancer-musician Thabisa Dinga and choreographer-director Ananda Fuchs to create a piece that pushed beyond gender and social propriety to explore human responses to attraction. 'THE ARCHITECTURE OF TEARS,' Malan said, 'was brilliantly choreographed and danced with all the ease and aplomb and daring and precision one could wish for.'



Athena Mazarakis and Alan Parker
in Nicola Elliott's BRUISING
Photo credit: CuePix/Gabriella Fregona

Moments of tension and friction, yes, but the overwhelming sensation was one of bonds of affection, and of love, given and received by the three artists. Shaun Oelf produced some dazzling pyrotechnics of movement! Unpacking relationships in a manner that pushed beyond sexuality into a fluid vision of the way in which human beings connect with one another, *THE ARCHITECTURE OF TEARS* promises great things to come from F08.

Darkroom Contemporary's [BLUEPRINT](#) rounds out BroadwayWorld's half dozen dance picks of 2014. This high profile, alternative project was performed at the Cape Town City Hall as part of the World Design Capital programme. Avoiding traditional theatrical spatial arrangements, the *BLUEPRINT* consisted of four dances that took place various venues on the upper floors of the City Hall, with audience members seated or standing around the performance space. Louise Coetzer's strongest choreography was showcased in a trio performed by Remo Adonis, Leilah Kirsten and Sherwin Rhode, looking at the relationship between the human body and urban environments. The seamless ensemble work in this piece made for the execution of some exciting contact choreography. Dazzling sequences of movement characterised the final piece which was conceptualised around a laser light installation by Fabian Humphry, moulding pyramids of light around the full company of dancers in the piece. Coetzer played with the concepts of mapping, scale and spatial arrangement as well as with the dichotomy between entrapment and freedom in this sestet, which proved to be a favourite with audiences.

Was any of these six dynamic dance pieces your favourite of the year? Join the conversation by leaving your comments about the dance and physical theatre pieces you enjoyed during 2014 using the comments feature beneath this article, and be sure to follow the rest of our "six of the best" columns as we put more of South Africa's theatrical triumphs centre stage as the dawn of 2015 approaches.

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