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Darkroom Contemporary's BLUEPRINT

Photo credit: Oscar O'Ryan

The opening night of the tenth edition of the Baxter Dance Festival was, as is the wont of festivals, a bit of a curate's egg. Consisting of six pieces, with one standout piece that was unfortunately not the much touted commissioned work, the Baxter Dance Festival nonetheless fulfilled its mandate to provide a platform for emerging and established choreographers and dance companies to present their work on one stage. Commencing with an opening address by festival producer, Nicolette Moses, the affirmation of the role of the Baxter Dance Festival in the local dance community was soured by announcement that City of Cape Town

played no role in financially supporting the festival. It seems logical, of course, that the City of Cape Town should support an initiative like this one, but the public shaming of the municipal organisation seemed if not inappropriate, at least inappropriately handled - a whine rather than a call to action that invested the evening with a narrative of self-importance that had to be borne by the artists in addition to their art. An unfortunate start, then, but one which many of the items overcame in one way or another, even if only one of the dances represented a fully realised journey from idea to execution.

The opening piece, "Ergo", choreographed by Celeste Botha and Marlin Zoutman for the New World Theatre Dance Company, dealt with the tension between self-expression and self-doubt within the context of physical expression. The choreography offered each of the dancers (Celeste Botha, Kristy Brown, Teagan Desvaux De Marigny, Sasha Fourie Myburgh, Natasha Rhode and Sam Willoughby) the opportunity to grapple with the presentation of the ego on the continuum between those two markers before coming together for some unison work. The unison work was not as well executed as the solo pieces, with the dancers' synchronisation needing greater attention. All six dancers displayed impressive range in their solos, but the idea that the best dancers are also great actors or, at least, great interpreters was reinforced by this piece; the most compelling work here was done by the dancers who managed to emote their conflict most convincingly. The costume design for this piece, a set of flowing white outfits that had a translucent quality, worked well for both the concept and the choreography, but the lighting design needed smoother cross-fades from cue to cue.

Things changed pace with the Flamenco Del Sur-Tierra Flamenco collaboration "Paco de Lucia - Salud y

Gracias", choreographed by Ché Adams and Juana Vargas as a tribute to the late De Lucia, a much renowned Spanish guitarist. The piece was vibrant, perhaps not totally embodying the *duende* that is so intimately associated with flamenco but certainly giving plenty of opportunity for the dancers to showcase their technical proficiency. Ashton Maherry was able to display his progress with nimble footwork, of which he is almost in complete control. When full control is achieved, he will be able to sink into the emotional release and sense of spontaneity that the genre requires.

The rest of the company - Ché Adams,

Ronel Cornelissen, Charlene Gilles, Sahra Heuwel, Dawn Jackson, Demi Johnson, Jessica Mayson, Kim Pretorius and Leilani Rooyen - wove on and off the stage, having great fun as they negotiated the flow of their sevillana-styled skirts.



Flamenco Del Sur and Tierra Flamenco's "Paco de Lucia - *Salud y Gracias*"

Photo credit: Oscar O'Ryan

The best realised piece in the programme was the fragment from BLUEPRINT, choreographed by Louise Coetzer of Darkroom Contemporary. BLUEPRINT was [seen in its entirety at the City Hall at the end of July this year](#) and this trio was the most gripping piece in a programme that effectively used contemporary dance to capture the *zeitgeist* of the contemporary urban experience. When I saw the piece on the programme for the festival, I wondered how BLUEPRINT would translate onto a traditional stage. On the Baxter stage, where the piece has been lit from the top and sides, the fascinating shadow play that was a key feature of the piece in the City Hall was lost, where the lighting came at sharp angles from the floor. What was gained, a clearer sense of the narrative concept that holds the piece together, made up for that loss and the piece was no less arresting in the end. Remo Adonis, Leilah Kirsten and Sherwin Rhode's strong technique and flawless ensemble work in executing Coetzer's exciting patterns of unity and counterpoint in her choreography - which neatly captures the duality of isolation and connection in city life - contributed significantly to the success of this piece in its new setting. Design wise, the geometric costumes support the piece's "blueprint" concept, as did the effects created by the side lighting, although the lights in the centre stage plane needed better focusing.



EOAN Group Theatre Company's "Splitting Images"

Some pieces that are placed within a festival of this kind represent personal journeys. "Splitting Images", choreographed by Mishkaah Medell for the EOAN Group Theatre Company, is just such a piece. In the opening address, the facilitation by the Baxter Dance Festival in developing Medell's talent as she rose through the ranks of the Fringe and Off-Main Programmes to take up a place on the Main Programme was extolled triumphantly. It is a moving story, and "Splitting Images" is a piece that found great favour with the audience.

Photo credit: Oscar O'Ryan

mothers (with Medell dancing opposite her own mother, Abeedah Medell) and between friends (where Medell was paired with Lucille Hendricks, Letitcia Fisher and Thará Alcock respectively), the programme quotes J.D. Salinger's "A Girl I Knew" as an inspiration for the piece. The thematic focus of the piece was a little diffused and a greater dialogue was needed between the two primary embodiments of the theme: the presence of the mother figure needed greater integration with the pairings of friends, each of which represented different genres of dance. The choreography itself had a beautifully natural flow of impulse and reaction, questioning and answering, and supporting and being supported, giving each sequence its own richness, which was enhanced by the committed emotional interpretation of the steps by the full company. Having been a talent to watch, this piece makes Medell a name to watch. As her work develops conceptually, she should find the spark that shifts sentiment into profundity.

The penultimate piece of the evening was Mzo Gaza's "Ababhidisi - The Conductors", choreographed primarily to Malcolm X's speech on "The House Negro and the Field Negro". In the piece, a pair of house Negroes (in the South African context, colonialized Africans) face off against a pair of field Negroes (Africans who embrace their traditional roots), who find support in a host of allies. Designed to be provocative, the latter group overwhelms the two "house negroes", whose choreographic language then shifts to match their assimilation into the crowd. On one hand, the piece is a condemnation of, as the programme puts it, 'leaders in our society' who promote 'dangerous paths that make us lose our connection to our communities, cultures and sense of right and wrong'. That seems like a valid argument. Academics like Zakes Mda have been debating the idea of the Rainbow Nation since the term was first coined, citing cultural assimilation as one disadvantage of the concept. On the other hand, the piece promotes re-assimilation - one with violent undertones, if this might be deemed necessary - as a solution to the problem. Gaza works from the perspective that the contemporary situation is identical to the historical one, a point of view that leaves no room for freedom of expression. A conversation that could inspire debate and even enlightenment becomes dogmatic, and a dance that aims for complexity fails to achieve it.

The final piece is the programme was the commissioned work, "Mode" by the Underground Dance Company, which should have been the crowning jewel of the Baxter Dance Festival's opening night. Not quite post-modern, but certainly a meta-theatrical commentary on dance, "Mode" deconstructs social dance and concert dance into impulses and conversations of movement, aiming for a mood of post-structuralist *jouissance*. Adding to complexity of the concept is a live operatic singer, Robin Botha, who is integrated into the piece using some of the choreographic vocabulary of the piece. The performance of Thalia Laric and Steven van Wyk's choreography by Ciara Barron, Luke de Kock, Cilna Katzke and Henk Opperman is committed. A similar intense sense of purpose characterises the choreography itself. It is everything that one expects as the foundation of excellent dance work. But clinging to that purpose so rigidly holds "Mode" back. When the creators and performers let go and sink into their work, "Mode" might truly catch fire and illuminate the stage. The costumes needed greater thought: the idea of the kilt-skirts is

Focusing on relationships between women, between daughters and



Underground Dance Company's "Mode"

Photo credit: Oscar O'Ryan

fascinating, but they need to be better tailored, while the turtlenecks seem to weigh down the dancers and their execution of choreography. The ingredients of a phenomenal dance piece are all present, but the ambitious "Mode" is not quite a phenomenal work of dance - yet.

The Baxter Dance Festival celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. The festival should be a cultural institution on Cape Town's annual calendar and, yet, I have never sat in a full house on any of the nights I have attended. The respective companies always have their support bases, but it feels to me as though the link between the dance community and the community at large needs to be forged more strongly. In theory, the Baxter Dance Festival is an ideal point of convergence for those links to be forged. Despite my hesitation at the manner in which the issue was approached in the opening address, I really do hope that the City of Cape Town finds a way to contribute to this conjunction of the arts and society so that the Baxter Dance Festival may continue to grow from strength to strength, promoting recognition for excellence in dance as well as for its development.

The 2014 Baxter Dance Festival, celebrating ten years of dance, runs until 18 October. Tickets are available through [Computicket](#).

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