

Get Down On It

Emily Slee on the Harnish-Lacey Dance Theatre's *Out/Exit*

Harnisch-Lacey Dance Theatre: *Out/Exit*, *The Gate*, Cardiff, Friday 11th July.

Harnisch-Lacey Dance theatre's performance encompasses exactly what their name implies: dance and theatre. It is a very difficult thing to truly combine the two; pieces claiming to be 'dance theatre' veer from theatrical pieces with a smattering of dance to dance pieces with a few lines of dialogue, it is also often a risky endeavour - too much exposition through dialogue often detracts from the dance which should be allowed to speak for itself. *Out/Exit* however balances the two effectively. In this two-piece performance from a collective which combines contemporary dance with street dance, popping and break dance, the performance is broken into two pieces, the energetic, urban-feeling *Exit*, followed by the grander theatrics of *Out*. *Exit*, which is said to 'Break down the barriers of stereotypical assumptions', feels the more experimental, exploratory piece: Four dancers sit on stage gradually coming to life and breaking into individual expressions under the gaze of BBoy Flypz who at first watches from a distance then circles the stage guides and focuses the piece through his accompaniment. The skills of BBoy Flypz could easily become overlooked against the impressive dance on display but his talent should also be recognised - it is not for nothing he was crowned Wales's BBoy Champion. The talent of the dancers (who are four young men of a variety of ethnic backgrounds - an element that aids the theme of challenging assumptions) is clear from the outset. The dance is used to assert the individuality of the characters, challenging the audience from the initial perception of the four hoodie-wearing characters slumped on stage at the start. Each dancer got their time to show off their particular skill varying from break-dance spins and flips to contemporary moves, flying jumps and breathtaking displays of agility. But it was when all three performed in sync that the piece truly took off. The dynamic contrast between the individual performances and the synchronicity and precision of the dancers together make *Exit* an exciting and engaging introduction to the company, before the more complex *Out*...

Out is performed on a far grander scale, lasting 40 minutes and incorporating music, film and a fifth character in performer Abby Guinness. The piece opens with Guinness's haunting singing; her dialogue guides the audience into the story but doesn't dominate it, introducing the themes, gently guiding the story onwards without dominating or detracting from the dance. This piece concerns loss and the way subconscious works at times of loss. Starting from the utter depths of despair and moving through various stages of grief and loss arriving at hope the piece takes the audience on this journey with it. Harnisch-Lacey's choreography provides guide and insight into this journey. Each of the four dancers, again, has an individual character expressing a variation on the stages of loss that Guinness narrates. As in *Exit*, the dance itself is simply breathtaking, made even more exhilarating by the use of the scaffolding stage which allows for greater feats of agility from the talented dancers. In addition effective use is made of the stage; the characters use it not only for impressive leaps and balances but also as spaces to inhabit as performers. This is the true strength and beauty of Harnisch-Lacey piece; it is not just impressive dance and choreography but the encompassing theatrics and emotions it creates. To simply call this an impressive dance piece would be to do disservice to the piece, which is a moving, beautifully executed bit of theatre, one which uses dance in order to communicate its message to the audience. The use of dance takes off where the words, the narration cannot continue. One of the most powerful moments comes when the dancers stop dancing, as they emerge from their individual bubbles of grief and sit together on the floor. This connection, this pause in their frenzied action illustrates the human action under the abstractions of the dance bringing it back into focus for the audience. There is something wonderfully moving about the combination of music dance and dialogue that in this piece moves in sync as perfectly as the dancer's movements. The audience is taken on the journey by the dance, feeling each stage of the confusion and grief arriving at hope at the end only to be reminded of the enduring pain that loss leaves by the haunting song sung beautifully by Guinness at the close of the piece; this long pause between the end of the dance and the close of the performance giving the audience time to reflect on what they have seen.

Out and *Exit* are an effective combination, the energy and exuberance of the first piece contrasts effectively with the quieter earnestness of the second. In the first piece we are impressed by the dance styles and also introduced, for those unfamiliar with the genre, to storytelling through dance. In the second we are given true dance theatre, the emotions and storyline of a traditional play condensed and played out through the different mediums, all working together, all telling the same story, a difficult and impressive feat. Harnisch-Lacey Dance theatre successfully cross boundaries, being accessible to non-dance audiences, and bringing a more theatrical element to dance audiences. These elements, alongside outstanding choreography and impeccable performances deliver an impressive evening's performance, at the centre of which there is the most important thing for any performance: true heart and emotion, which is effectively, and it must be said impressively, communicated to the audience.

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