Identity, nature intertwine in 2017’s Berkeley Dance Project

BY SOPHIE-MARIE PRIME | STAFF

Rhythmic breathing and organic movement were central to every piece in this year’s Berkeley Dance Project performance. Berkeley Dance Project is a yearly production put on by the department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, or TDP, in which pieces choreographed by students and faculty are performed by students. Influences of modern art and performance art, as well as theater, made the show entirely different from any of the usual campus dance performances.

The first piece, “Blahh,” was a solo performance choreographed by TDP student Angela Colby. It’s described as a subversion of cliché, which it achieved nominally and not always in the most compelling fashion. The piece captured an audacious tone through choreography that felt like a calculated frenzy, with movements that seemed either arbitrary or only motivated by momentum. The essence of adolescence is over-thinking something and then acting on a whim, and “Blahh” certainly felt as though its choreography did the same. While intriguing, this piece communicated something off-target from its goal.

Energy was high, visual and powerful in Krista DeNiro’s “Network,” the second piece of the show. Throughout “Network,” the collective expanded out to make best use of the vast stage space and returned insured for community and strength.

The dancers’ vulnerability in “Network” was impactful. The piece was powerful, its thematic fought. The set for this piece was impressive, featuring hanging screens that transformed into two tunnels, but at times it felt disconnected from the dance itself. A few minutes in, Jail cell walls were lowered with shadowed lighting, and the dancers delivered spoken word monologues.

Aiming to encapsulate survival and incarceration, “Network” mediated themes of nature and defiances. Coping mechanisms, community and confinement were certainly present throughout the performance, which incorporated spoken word and several pieces of dance. The dancers’ monologues were deeply affecting and felt very personal. They spoke to institutional oppression, systematic failures and the desire to bond with communities.

It seems that “Network” intended to cultivate empathy and resistance, but if it accomplished this, it did so at the expense of not giving the spoken-word stories space of their own. By presenting stories of incarceration, immigration, sexuality, identity, gender-based violence and others on top of nature, each got lost in the shuffle. In the context of a piece that includes so many (perhaps too many) overlapping themes, the goal of the piece gets blurred and the individualized narratives don’t get the attention they needed to deserve.

“Boredom,” choreographed by TDP student Joaquin Nata, was a duet in which dancers interacted with clothing scattered across the stage through movements that juxtaposed sensuality with sexuality in a compelling and joyful way. The piece elicited giggles and smiles from the audience — it was fun to watch, and it felt like a positive engagement with identity politics.

“Meta Morphos,” the fourth and final piece of the show, choreographed by TDP alumna and faculty member James Graham, engaged with nature and the elements. The piece began with striking lighting resembling a sunrise and a soft waterfall flowing onto a cluster of rocks as the dancers emerged in chromatic leotards and baggy pants. Repeated energy flowed throughout the dancers’ graceful and organic movements, which appeared to be both pre-choreographed and improvised.

“Meta Morphos” had an avant garde feel, and its all-female corps evoked feminism in nature and the image of Mother Earth. The collective resonance for Earth and nature was particularly poignant as one of the performances coincided with Earth Day on April 22.

Minimalism in “Meta Morphos” was effective — rarely can themes be so unclear and so nebulous that they actually achieve the kind of engraving impact that Graham’s piece did. By focusing itself from any specific goal, “Meta Morphos” opened up to connect with each audience member in varying, though equally dazzling, ways.

Berkeley Dance Project is a unique experience that shares a small but invaluable department with the campus. This year’s pieces were complex and nuanced and offered thoughtful reflections on art, nature, the meeting of personal and political performance and dance themselves. Berkeley Dance Project will show at Zellerbach Playhouse on April 27, April 28 and April 29 at 8 p.m.

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Correction(s):
In a previous version of this article, choreographer Krista DeNiro was incorrectly listed as Krista DeNiro.

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The Berkeley Ballet performs "Figure a Sea," a work that explores the relationship between nature and humanity. The piece, which celebrates the 40th anniversary of the school’s founding, is a work that is both meditative and powerful, capturing the beauty and complexity of the natural world.

The performance was held at the Zellerbach Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. The dancers were fully immersed in the performance, their movements flowing seamlessly with the music. The lighting and set design added to the overall atmosphere of the piece, creating a sense of wonder and awe.

The piece is divided into two sections, the first of which explores the connection between humans and nature. The dancers move gracefully, their movements mirroring the natural world. The second section is more focused on the individual, exploring the innermost thoughts and emotions of the dancer.

Overall, Figure a Sea is a stunning piece that is sure to leave a lasting impression on anyone who sees it. The Berkeley Ballet’s dedication to their craft is evident in every movement, and the result is a work of art that is both beautiful and thought-provoking.