Sensuality, identity and femininity explored in Berkeley Dance Project’s new showcase

BY DANIEL MEANS | STAFF

Between the blogosphere and the social media networks of the digital age, our body language seems to have lost its place in modern discussion. Face-to-face interaction seems antiquated. Talking to someone across a cafe table requires time, careful attention and commitment — qualities that, ultimately, are antithetical in today’s omnipresent value of efficiency. Yet, what goes unheard when our body’s language falls on deaf ears?

The Berkeley Dance Project’s latest show, “Beneath the Flesh,” broke the silence and used the body as a voice in a powerful forum for raw emotion, philosophically-inspired choreography and masterful set designs. “Beneath the Flesh” divided itself into three works, performed by an almost entirely female cast, that spoke of the tensions of being and becoming a woman in modern society.

Even before entering the theater, the audience got a taste of truly bizarre juxtapositions of body and space they were about to see. Stepping into the corridor that led to my seat, I stood frozen when I noticed someone huddled in the corner, sobbing quietly. I continued walking as the mysterious woman began following me through the corridor, desperately clinging onto the wall and handrail support. Thoroughly bewildered, I eventually made it to my seat, where my fellow audience members were casually chatting away, making the entire ordeal even more surreal. This was but a taste of the performance’s forceful collisions of the body with the dark moments that lie on the fringes of human emotion.

The pieces themselves delivered a more mainstream brand of feminism that focused on the internal and external forces that shape girls throughout the stages of womanhood. In the work “Searching for the Moon in the Dark Night Sky,” choreographed by Amara Tabor-Smith, it was not so much the content as it was the choice of media that challenged existing narrative forms of femininity. The dancers forcefully used writhing and seizing movements of the body to communicate the gravity of the emotional violence that women experience in society. Tabor-Smith coordinated the dancers with a multimedia display that...
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The dance's political narrative was a counter argument against modern media's objectification of the female body. That isn't to say that the dancers didn't emphasize their respective physical sensualities, but the performers brought forward the social and emotional burdens that come along with the feminine form.

UC Berkeley dance program director Lisa Wymore's “The dead are born from a dream of the living” exhibited her disciplined approach to the art, as well as her expert stagecraft, that made for the show's stand-out piece. Sparse, echoing stompis and long tonal notes sung by the dancers came together in a minimalist symphony that set the airy landscape for their performance.

Wymore told a story of our journey through life and death on a stage divided into four realms of work, home, harvest and nature. The dancers acted not as characters but as sentiments corresponding to a stage of life; making for a narrative that couched existentialism in a set akin to Mondrian's structured abstractions. With a calm, controlled tempo, movements that were spacey yet exact, and an engaging scenscape, the work was simply minimalist dance at its finest.

Whether in discussions of life and death or the state of femininity, “Beneath the Flesh” stopped at nothing to uncover the festering reality of identity politics. With personal moments verging on outright voyeurism, the show brought us into the neurotic tensions that form the self. The pieces, though at times disjointed, gave an honest portrayal of the fractured identities that comprise our modern age.


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