

# f o r d

review



## Welcome Guests

Performance

Fall for Dance Festival, Program 5

Place

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Words

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New York has always been a hub for dance from all over the world, but the last few years, because of the pandemic, have created a sense of isolation. We began to forget how exciting visits by far-off companies can be, how they quicken the senses and renew our admiration for a particular artist, or introduce us to something completely new.

There have been several such moments of rediscovery in this year's Fall for Dance festival. It is the last edition that will take place under the tenure of its creator Arlene Shuler, who retires from City Center this year. Over the course of the last two weeks I have been particularly struck by the vulnerability projected by the heroically-proportioned men of the Compagnie Hervé Koubi, made up mostly of Algerian dancers, and by the raw vocal power and engrossing stage presence of the flamenco singer María Terremoto. The final program (Program 5) included performances by two more such visitors, the Odissi company Nrityagram, from outside Bangalore, and a quartet of dancers from the Amsterdam-based Dutch National Ballet. Both made strong impressions.

Nrityagram has been a regular visitor to New York. But there have been changes since the company's last appearance here, at the Metropolitan Museum in 2018. Bijayini Satpathy, considered the most exemplary interpreter of the choreographies of Surupa Sen, the troupe's artistic director, left to pursue a solo career. And Surupa Sen did not appear onstage as a dancer; instead, she sat with the other musicians on the side, singing in a powerful contralto and rapping out syncopated rhythms on the finger cymbals.



Nrityagram performing “Sankirtanam.” Photograph by Karthik Venkataraman

Nrityagram is still the most exciting Indian classical dance ensemble I have ever seen. This is due mainly to Sen’s choreographic imagination. The dancers performed “Poornārātī,” a work that combines Odissi, a classical form from the East of India, danced by four female dancers from Nrityagram, with Kandyan dance from Sri Lanka, performed by two men and two women from the Chitrasena company. The styles share some aspects: turned out legs, a low stance, the contrast of vertical and horizontal lines across the body. But they are more different than they are similar, and therein lies one of the intriguing aspects of the piece: the way it contrasts the verticality, space-eating movement, and elongated lines of the Kandyan dancers with the swaying torsos, rounded movements, and subtlety of the Odissi dancers.

But it is Sen's choreography that makes the interaction between these two styles exciting. Poornārati is not a showcase but rather a danced conversation, in which the qualities of movement of the two groups work in counterpoint to each other, creating thrilling shifts in dynamic and texture. Lines cross, dancers face off, alternate, enter into canons with each other. Meanwhile the stage remains full of movement and rhythmic vibrancy, with patterns appearing and dissolving in quick succession. The live musical accompaniment, on harmonium, mardala drum, flute, violin, and voice is as thrilling as the dance. By the end, the energy rises to such a level, with the Odissi dancers arching into deep backbends and the Kandyan dancers launching themselves into barrel jumps, that something like a state of ecstasy is achieved. I've seldom heard such an ovation for classical Indian dance on a New York stage.



Dutch National Ballet in "Variations for Two Couples" by Hans Van Manen. Photograph by Angela Sterling

The four dancers from Dutch National brought a short work, “Variations for Two Couples” by the company’s eminence grise, Hans Van Manen, who was in the house. Here the wonder was less the smoothly-flowing choreography than the dancers, models of a very European prototype, chosen for their exquisite proportions, physical and facial gorgeousness, impossibly long lines, and a kind of otherworldly elegance. This is especially true of Olga Smirnova, the Bolshoi dancer who bravely chose to leave Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is now a member of the company. How can anyone look so beautiful in a spandex unitard? How can balletic movement seem so innately organic to a human body?

The four dancers, divided into two couples, glided, stretched, lunged, and spun to an atmospheric medley of music by Benjamin Britten, the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara, the Yugoslavian-born Stevan Kovacs Tickmayer, and Piazzolla. All was liveness, style, and amazing extensions of the legs. The final section added a hint of tango sultriness to the mix. But what impressed was the coolness and restraint of the dancers, who moved through space with the nonchalance of balletic superheroes.



Martha Graham Dance Company in Hofesh Shechter’s “CAVE,” co-produced by Daniil Simkin.  
Photograph by Brian Pollock

The program closed with something more down to earth: “Cave,” a kind of throbbing pseudo rave for the Martha Graham Dance Company, choreographed by the British-Israeli dancemaker Hofesh Shechter. Shechter’s dances often involve a kind of tribal, almost zombie-like communal brain. They channel the throbbing pulse of club culture, combined with the group-think of political rallies, the energy of exercise classes, the ecstasy of speaking in tongues. The “creative producer” of this particular piece is Daniil Simkin, who performs with the Graham dancers. Simkin, a ballet dancer known for his buoyant jump and razor-sharp precision, fully immerses himself in the group dynamic, moving with the same sinuous, undulating, earth-bound slinkiness of the Graham dancers.

There is something undeniably mesmerizing about the way the dancers give themselves to the beat, becoming a roiling mass of bobbing heads, grasping hands, folding backs. But “Cave” is plagued by a numbing sameness, as the relentlessly throbbing beat measures out the movement phrases into sets of four to eight beats. It’s a case of energy trumping interesting choreographic ideas. When it comes to rhythmic variety and choreographic variety, it seems to me Shechter could learn a thing or two from Surupa Sen.

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