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The Best Dance Performances of 2016; Critics Round-Up

By Juan Michael Porter II | January 2, 2017



In any given year there are thousands of dance performances to be seen in New York. Even if one managed to take in all of those shows, it wouldn't be feasible to select the nine "best". Rather than playing Alastair Macaulay and passing judgment over the entire field I will discuss the performances from the 2016 season that moved me most. This listing is in one definitive order: Random.

July 2016. Bridgman | Packer at The Sheen Center

Bridgman | Packer's performance illustrated that you don't have to be in your 20's to be sexy. *Remembering What Never Happened* found two weathered beauties - Myrna Packer and Art Bridgman - interacting with time delayed 3-D holographic images of themselves to soul-stirring effect. Though working with a limited movement vocabulary, the world of wonder that these two generated felt like a painting awakening to devour reality. This was particularly true of *Voyeur* which projected memories of a couple reuniting and falling apart onto the set of a cutout house while their corporeal bodies tripped through past confrontations. As I wrote in my original review: 'This is art that "younger audiences" think of when they ask for something cool.'

Nimbus Dance Works in Darshan Singh Bhuller's Mapping

June 2016. Nimbus Dance Works at Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center

Nimbus Dance Works' Geolocate offered two incredible pieces from the company's artistic director Samuel Pott and Darshan Singh Bhuller. Pott's Surface Tension presented the final moments of a dying woman as her life flashed before our eyes. What might have been maudlin, in this fantastic choreographer's hands became life-affirming. Those threnody flashbacks carried the force of love, rage, joy, and hate from people who actually meant something to the dying; all the random, petty, ridiculous, and sincere moments that comprise a life were on full display before dissolving unto dust. Surface Tension perfectly encapsulated the feeling that we lost too many beloved people too soon this year.

Bhuller's Mapping closed Geolocate with the promise of what comes after hard work; pure ecstasy. Inspired by his father's journey from East to West, Mapping plays out like rushing home for a weekend of fun after having survived rigorous training at a martial arts monastery. Midway through the piece our perspective is flipped, converting the stage into a live-action film. In that one dazzling sweep, Bhuller reveals the truth about children: they will find a reason to play, whatever their circumstances. It's an unadulterated joy that adults long for and instantly recognize because they spend their later years attempting to reclaim it. Bottom line: See this piece before you die.

April 2016. Ballet Hispánico at The Joyce Theatre

Ballet Hispánico opened its 45th anniversary concert with a mind-blowing performance of Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's Flabbergast. This is the ballet version of having your cake, smashing it all over the table, and then licking its splattered icing off the wall. As performed by these spectacular dancers it turns out that's the best way to devour any dessert. Flabbergast is the story of immigrants traveling to new destinations and embracing the unexpected. We all have songs that we associate with certain recollections; this ballet is a constant jog through guffaws and memories as evoked by music, like a mixed tape for life. Zany, fun, emotionally affecting, and not afraid to go beyond weird - a karaoke conga line, a back-gripping goodbye, pushing through a crowd of strangers only to make new friends - this was the sweetest piece I observed all year.

March 2016. Dayton Contemporary Dance Company presented by Paul Taylor's American Modern Dance at Koch Theater

Topical politics aside, anytime Donald McKayle's classic masterpiece Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder is given a revival is just cause for celebration. This is a work of moving sadness that doesn't pretend that things are going to get better. It's the story of men working on the chain gang; Black Men doing hard labor dreaming intermittently of doing something more meaningful with their lives. That dream never comes to pass; instead we see these men dance their hearts out in Mr. McKayle's physically gripping and spiritually punishing depiction of what it is to be Black without options. In Rainbow, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company made clear why it is necessary to demand that Black Lives matter; because for too long they have not. Like Alvin Ailey's Revelations, this is a piece that should be seen every year.

May 2016. American Ballet Theatre at The Metropolitan Opera House

Alexei Ratmanský's Serenade after Plato's Symposium, set to an eponymous score by Leonard Bernstein, puts the stuffiest of subject matter - seven male philosophers plus one invited woman discussing love - onstage and transmogrifies it into pure magic. Many are the arguments about love, and for every potential response Ratmanský has crafted a fantastic movement scheme. Watching eight of the most talented dancers from ABT's roster blaze through the very definition of variation-upon-a-theme brought to life sent a jolt of fire through the Metropolitan Opera House that had the entire audience rocking back and forth as if it were worshipping at the feet of the

greatest rockstar-cum-preacher. It was all in service of waxing poetic on the many moods of love, and just as “love is a many splendored thing” Serenade is a triumph of interlocking steps in dialogue with one another. My favourite moment came during a silky solo adage wherein Jose Sebastian enchanted the stage with tricky shifts of weight to reveal the discombobulating power of love. Magnificent.

August 2016. Battery Dance Festival at Robert F Wagner Junior Park

Jonathan Hollander has been presenting some of the world’s best dance companies in Battery Dance Festival for over 35 years. Though making art ain’t easy, this incredible man has taken charge and gathered sponsorship from an impressive consortium of partners to fly in and host far-flung talent all in the name of performing for an admissions-free audience. This year’s festival was lovingly dedicated to the memory of “Adel Euro”, a talented dancer who was tragically killed in Baghdad this summer. Aside from telling you everything you need to know about the current state of the field, this festival makes it clear that dance is an act of love.

Highlights included the sensational Romanian artists - who danced through a passing squall - Razvan and Anda Roxana Stoian, the entire Erasing Borders Festival of Indian Dance, and the festival’s Friday night line-up of choreographers: Ted Thomas, Lori Belilove, Jacquelyn Buglisi, Caitlin Trainor, and Amy Marshall. My final praise goes to the wonderful dancer Jessica Kilpatrick who - while performing full out in an Egypt meets Kung-fu spectacle created by Ms. Marshall - was punched in the face, given a bloody nose, and knocked to the ground only to immediately bounce back and finish the dance perfectly with 1000% energy. The show must go on; with dancers like this, it always will.

July 2016. Dušan Týnek Dance Theatre at New York Live Arts

Dušan Týnek’s concert at New York Live Arts had many things going for it, but its greatest asset was the performance handed in by Alexandra Berger in Logbook. Berger is not only the company’s senior member, she is also its reigning artist; the one to whom we look to understand Týnek’s style. In Logbook she soared through the air like a goddess riding the moon in search of something greater. Set to a mesmerizing lighting design – paths of light materialized to illuminate the way forward – accompanied by Aleksandra Vrebalov’s entrancing score of Morse code like beeps, and led by Berger’s ever sweeping eyes, this glorious work made tangible the ephemeral concept of searching. There are numerous interpretations for what Logbook might have been about. Pleasingly, these interpretations matter far more than any resolution.

November 2016. Pilobolus Dance Theater at NYU Skirball Center

In terms of the year’s best concert, Pilobolus takes the prize. The dancers of Pilobolus are parkour savvy ninjas with poetic souls who create dance for boyfriends and moms, AKA the people who will dutifully sit through anything but who would rather have a good time and walk out of the concert hall thinking “How the Hell did they do that?” Even armed with my background in dance, I don’t understand how these phenomenal creatures accomplish half of what they do. The pieces that continue to haunt me are Inbal Pinto’s Rushes – chairs transform into bridges, prisons, and home in a surrealistic dreamscape – and Javier De Frutos’ Thresh|Hold – a revolving door flies across the stage while dancers flip through its ever shifting perspective. Breathtaking.

May 2016. Deborah Zall Dance Theatre at The Martha Graham Studio Theater

Deborah Zall set a number of her solos on former dancers of the Martha Graham Dance Company in an evening of womanly archetypes brought to life. Considered a master teacher of the Graham technique, Ms. Zall uses her distinctive fluency to pursue ideas that Graham herself never would have entertained. These are smaller characters in less than operatic situations though the results are just as devastating. My favourite portrait was of Erika Dankmeyer in “Amanda” which told the story of that vain mother from “The Glass Menagerie” before she was ruined by time and circumstance. Utilizing a mirror and subtle tilts of the head to transform herself,

Dankmeyer took the audience on a rollercoaster ride through Amanda's timeline. It was exhausting and exhilarating all at once. I left the theatre wishing that the Graham company would ring Ms. Zall and beg her to loan them a few of her works. Hint. HINT.

Crazy elections and tragic deaths aside, a lot of wonderful things happened in 2016. These performances are the proof of the pudding. That said, here's to an even greater 2017.