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# Now a tradition: A showcase for male dancers

Just as SAM presents a show about women artists, "Men in Dance" makes its Seattle return.



## "Men in Dance"

"Men in Dance" is back, offering an opportunity to present unique talents. Above: Sam Picart and Sean Rosado in Jason Ohlberg's "The Bella Pictures (1997)." Photo by Colleen Dishy

**A day after** the Seattle Art Museum began its three-month exhibition of women artists, another same-gender arts show had its own opening Friday (Oct. 12) in a two-weekend run at the Broadway Performance Hall. *Men In Dance: Against the Grain* features the male side of the human equation, the ninth time this festival has been presented. It was started in 1994 by a group of dancers and choreographers who wished to create a showcase that would "highlight their specialty and uniqueness."

Two years ago, *Men in Dance* was a diverse show highlighted by a stunning and understated solo performed by Peter Boal, the artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet in a work created for him by Donald Byrd.

This year's edition of 10 dances was not as varied, nor as subtle, with broad similarities in the dynamics of at least three of the group works that perhaps bespeaks a level of overfamiliarity with each other's work by the performers and choreographers involved.

**These dances shared a propulsive quality** and a sense of urgency, with musical scores in which percussive sounds predominated. Opening the program was Iyun Harrison's trio, *Tres Reyes*. These three kings, dramatic Jason Ohlberg, precise Timothy Lynch, and the grounded Mr. Harrison, seemed at times to be jockeying for position, or to be dancing for an unseen other.

For much of the dance they were spot on with the simple driving sounds of Ben Morrow's music, dancing together and taking individual turns. Often moving up and down stage on the beat with a shifting side step, alternating one leg in demi-plie, the other extended, they reminded me of Indian classical dancers who throw out some wonderful, complex movement sequence downstage only to sidle rhythmically backward several steps before coming enthusiastically forward again to dance up a storm.

The precise movement and the simple percussion were quite lovely together, though in the last part of the dance a fuller sound dominated the electronic score, and the choreography veered off center, losing its focused power.

One of Seattle's great dance treasures, Wade Madsen, gave us a droll kinetic version of TV's *Mad Men* in his dance, *Manner Tanz*. When it was mentioned to the audience at the top of the evening that his piece would include brief nudity, a rousing cheer arose from the enthusiastic and good-natured audience.

**The “full frontal nudity” was only momentary**, with one dancer so unsuited, the other five in various states of dress. All soon were in white shirts, suits, and ties. As if driven by their working lives, they moved robotically around the stage, did a fair if funky imitation of a Busby Berkeley vertical chorus line, and in general seemed propelled by forces beyond their control, at the end throwing off clothing in seeming anger and frustration. Eric Pitsenbarger stood out for his persuasive performance. As by far the oldest of the sextet, he may have learned the hard way what working life can be all about.

Deborah Wolf's dance *Crash of Days* was notable for two set pieces by Michelle de la Vega composed of tangled silvery metal geometrics that were at stage level and then hovered over the five dancers. As in Madsen's piece, the performers seemed compelled by some willful energy to dance with great vigor. The clanging sounds from the aggressive music by Annie Gosfield, the set pieces, and the equally forceful movement were reminiscent of the din and activity on a factory floor.

The ensemble of five ably interpreted Wolf's complex choreography, with Jason Ohlberg a standout. At one point he is lifted sideways by another dancer, and for a brief second while airborne he rests his head on the other's shoulder, an all-but-imperceptible movement that demonstrated the sophistication of this intelligent performer.

As a dancemaker, Ohlberg contributed a lovely and sensual duet, *The Bella Pictures*, with music by Antonio Vivaldi featuring the well-matched Sam Picart and Sean Rosado, each thin, loose limbed, and with short dark hair. They sinuously twined themselves around each other and did nifty lifts in a dance that had well-thought out structure and flow, from time to time flirting too closely to clichés of the romantic pas de deux.

Another duet was offered by San Francisco-based choreographer Robert Dekkers. Tight and well-executed, and danced by Patrick Kilbane and Dekkers himself, *Interference Pattern* demonstrated equal parts timing, technique, and athleticism, though projected visuals and an irritating score diminished its overall impact.

This was apparently the first time visiting artists had performed at the festival and Mike Esperanza and dancers, also from California, presented a quartet that effectively explored two manipulating and manipulated couples.

**One of the sweeter aspects of *Men in Dance* is the age range** of the performers. While waiting in the lobby for the house to open, a group of young hoofers did a tap jam organized under the guidance of Anthony Peters, a noted local teacher and performer, who did a couple of swell turns himself.

Upstairs on stage, eight teen and pre-teen boys from the young people's Kaleidoscope Dance Company presented *That's Why*, in which they expressed kinetically and vocally their reasons for dancing. It was originally created by an earlier generation of company members and artist Tom Truss in 1996, then re-created earlier this year with the assistance of Jesse Jaramillo, a long-time member of the local dance community who recently passed away, and in whose memory the festival was dedicated.

*Men in Dance* is a valuable and unique element in the constellation of Seattle dance, an excellent platform for displaying the skills of contemporary and ballet dance artists in our community. However, this year's event seemed a bit limited, lacking variation and nuance. For the future, more guest artists from out of town might help, as could reaching out to the ethnic dance community for more diverse approaches to movement, or adding new voices and vision to those who make the choices for the festival's programming.

Next weekend's *Men in Dance* will repeat some of the works on the program reviewed, and four pieces not yet seen, including a new solo by Olivier Wevers, and more out-of-town guests.

*If you go: Men in Dance, Friday and Saturday, Oct. 19 and 20 at 8 p.m., and Sunday, Oct. 21, at 2 p.m., Broadway Performance Hall, 1625 Broadway. General admission \$25; seniors/students \$20. More information and tickets: <http://www.menindance.org>, or at the Broadway Performance Hall box office one hour before the show.*