

Men in Dance/Against the Grain Festival

Broadway Performance Hall, through October 21

By Alice Kaderlan

Every two years Seattle dance audiences get a special treat – an evening of works danced exclusively by men. Now in its 9th incarnation, the first weekend of the Men in Dance/Against the Grain Festival once again provided a number of delights. Some of them will be repeated on next weekend's closing program while at least one is slated to be seen in a full-length version in 2013.

Putting together a well-rounded evening of short works by different choreographers is always a challenge. Unfortunately, this year's opening program was overly repetitive. Of the eight works, three used a mechanistic movement style and clanging, percussive scores while two others – duets both – had enough similarities that the second one became boring just a few minutes into it.

Next weekend the pieces that will be repeated come in a different order; it will be interesting to see if Deborah Wolf's "Crash of Days" has more of an impact as the opening rather than closing ballet. It's a strong, abstract work with the highest production value, largely the result of two hanging sculptures that frame Wolf's razor-sharp movement style. The five dancers in their shimmering unitards threw themselves into Wolf's angular flashes. But after Markeith Wiley's excerpt from his ballet "Tre" and Wade Madsen's spirited "Manner Tanz," by the time "Crash of Days" came around, I felt I had seen enough of automatons.

"Manner Tanz" is a new Madsen ballet and his flare for invention was on full view, along with a brief moment of male frontal nudity. As the curtain goes up, five men are facing us in various stages of undress, from nude to almost completely clad in shirt, pants and tie. Gradually, they all put on whatever clothing they need to finish their full business attire. They then begin a mechanistic enactment of men at work and the result is a piece that might easily be called "Automatons get up, get dressed and go to work." It's not a profound ballet but offered many moments of sheer delight.

Mike Esperanza's "Snap" for four dancers also relied on a mechanistic movement style but to entirely different effect. Two "puppet masters" maneuver two "puppets" through a series of technically challenging and visually stirring postures. The puppets escape momentarily but are pulled back into the grasp of their masters. Like "Manner Tanz" there's no clear narrative but, like Madsen, Esperanza has a gift for creating a mood and an environment that suggests character and story.

The most "dancy" piece on the program – apart from a brief solo variation by a former member of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo – was Iyun Harrison's "Tres Reyes." The three performers – Harrison, Timothy Lynch and Jason Ohlberg – really looked like kings of dance in this flowing, abstract ballet. Sometimes they moved in perfect unison, sometimes in individual or paired variations but always with precision and musicality.

Rounding out the program were Ohlberg's "The Bella Pictures" and Robert Dekkers "Interference Pattern." Both were love duets, with Ohlberg's the more successful due to his talent for fluidity and musical sensibility. It's possible that without its distracting and poorly executed video projection the Dekkers piece might have greater impact. As it was, the video of a man's face overpowered the contact improvisation-inspired intermingling of the two dancers and seemed irrelevant to the interaction between them.

The one thing that was absolutely consistent throughout the evening was the quality of the dancing. All the performers were technically strong and attuned to the needs of the different choreographers. A number of them will be back next weekend, when Olivier Wevers' "More," set to Ravel's "Bolero," will have its world premiere.