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Winner of a 2012 Pulitzer Prize

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'Men in Dance': Talent from Seattle and beyond

A review of Seattle's "Men in Dance" festival at Broadway Performance Hall through Oct. 21, 2012.

By Michael Upchurch Seattle Times arts writer

"Men in Dance" — a biennial festival that you wish would go annual already! — is back at Broadway Performance Hall. And as always, it highlights our local male dance talent.

But it's also introducing something new this year: out-of-towners.

Striking works by Robert Dekkers (from San Francisco) and Mike Esperanza (New York) were among Weekend One's canniest pleasures.

Dekkers' "Interference Pattern," a duet for him and Patrick Kilbane, didn't feel like a duet at first. Instead, the dancers kept a distance from each other, although their personal space was threatened with mutual invasion from time to time. When that invasion finally came, it took the form of continual hanging, rolling, tumbling contact: a tight athletic tussle that made you want to see more work by this guy.

Ditto with Esperanza's "Snap." It's a quartet for four men, two of them in puppet-like roles, two others as puppetmasters. When the puppets break loose, their movement has a zesty, expansive complexity. When they're lured back into their masters' grasp, their inept arm-swings seem a poignantly feeble attempt at autonomy. This is smart, affecting, technically accomplished work. Some local offerings were just as good. Wade Madsen's "Manner Tanz" is ingeniously witty as it puts five men in various states of undress (including full-frontal nudity) into suits, ties and jackets. Once decently clad, they're break into mechanical-man paces, ornamented with crazy finger waggles and other unlikely moves. But they can keep up their robo-efficiency only so long before they backslide. "Crash of Days" by Deborah Wolf (occasionally a female choreographer is put in charge of the men) also involves some disciplined semi-mechanistic movement — although the effect is less of zany wind-up toys than entrapment in a vigorous industrial nightmare. The five dancers give it their all. The fast-paced partnering of Jason Ohlberg and Sean Tomerlin is especially wily and impressive, and Wolf's sense of mischief shows through a droll ending.

Ohlberg has his own piece in the show: "The Bella Pictures," a tender, puppyish, acrobatic duet performed by Sam Picart and Sean Rosado. The 1997 piece, with its title's allusion to the noted wedding photographers, clearly has some relevance to the marriage-equality vote coming up — but its fluid shapes and beauty are what make it merit revival.

Iyun Harrison weighed in with the tightest, most impressive piece I've seen by him yet, "Tres Reyes," for three male dancers. Ohlberg, Timothy Lynch and Harrison were well up to the challenge of the piece, which blended balletic virtuosity with flavors more dervishlike and feral. Markeith Wiley's "Tre" was less satisfying, but certainly had high energy going for it.

The whole show was dedicated to the memory of dancer-teacher Jesse Jaramillo, who died in August. The youngsters of Kaleidoscope Dance Co. dedicated their performance of "That's Why" (a piece Jaramillo worked on) to him as well.

"Manner Tanz," "Crash of Days" and "The Bella Pictures" all repeat on Weekend Two, as do some high-camp hijinks by Chris Montoya (formerly with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo). Dekkers' and Esperanza's pieces won't be back, alas. Nor will Harrison's or Wiley's. But an intriguing-sounding work by Bill Wade of Ohio, originally set on identical twins, is coming up. So is a solo set that Whim W'Him's Olivier Wevers set on Pacific Northwest Ballet dancer Andrew Bartee.

One last shout-out: Lighting designer Meg Fox brought out the different threads and moods of each piece with a versatile eye, lovingly sculpting them with light.

Michael Upchurch: mupchurch@seattletimes.com