

CityDance Ensemble's Total 'Eclipse'

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Though professional dancers train for years to achieve perfect technique, there is one rule that trumps everything else when it comes to performing: make it look effortless. CityDance Ensemble's performance of "Eclipse" on Sunday evening at the Music Center at Strathmore more than accomplished this feat.

The concert was part of the D.C.-based contemporary repertory dance company's "In the Studio" concert series, which transforms a dance studio into a tiny theater complete with risers, wings and lighting. Seating capacity is limited to 150 seats at each performance.

The beauty of this is that the audience can see absolutely everything, up close and personal. During a break between pieces as dancers were preparing for their next number, Artistic Director Paul Gordon Emerson joked to the front row, "You're closer to the dancers than most people are when they sit in the same car."

Despite the perks of the intimate venue, a luxury for most art forms, this closeness can sometimes be a recipe for disaster when it comes to dance. In such a small setting, there is no room for error, fatigue, or lack of a connection between the dancers, as every flaw is magnified for the audience. The dancers of CityDance never had this problem — their performance was intimate yet removed enough to keep the illusion of effortlessness alive. The spell was never broken.

The company presented six works ranging in style and feel. "Unusable Signal," a world premiere by CityDance Rehearsal Director Christopher K. Morgan, set the tone for the evening with an energetic men's trio. Seeking to explore modern society's tendency to use electronic devices as a method of tuning out reality, Morgan's choreography was an interesting mix of propulsion and balance. "UnRavel" was a welcome surprise, a light and classical work set to the music of Maurice Ravel. Choreographed by the late Eric Hampton, a popular D.C. choreographer who lost a battle with Lou Gehrig's Disease in 2001, "UnRavel" featured a lively quartet of dancers whose vibrant orange costumes were indeed unraveling at the ends.



The performance's namesake and final work "Eclipse" featured a trio of two women and three men battling through a complicated, emotional, and sometimes even violent love triangle. The trio physically pushed and pulled each other into and out of relationships in a dance set to a score of air raid sirens. Choreographer Doug Varone is somewhat controversially known for his ability to push boundaries and while the work is challenging to watch, the clear connection between the dancers keeps the work accessible.

CityDance Ensemble's 2007-2008 season continues in December with performances of "Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Books" at the Lansburgh Theater. In March, City Dance Ensemble will work with Shakespeare Theater Company to perform "Shakespeare's Sonnets," interpreting the ageless poems of the famed poet through music and movement.

The company's "In the Studio" series next year on April 12 and 13, features "Bold Steps: Warmer," in which dancers and choreographers will tackle global warming and the impact art will have on the issue. The series wraps up in June with "The Songwriters," a program centered around America's great songwriters, from Woody Guthrie to Patsy Cline.

For dance lovers looking to experience dance in a different, more intimate way, the "In the Studio" series is an ideal choice. As Alexe Nowakowski, CityDance Executive Director, says, "There's nothing that can be hidden or exaggerated with these shows, and that's part of their beauty. They're honest, absorbing, and undisguised, just as dance should be."