

Urbanity Dance in $F=ma$: For the love of it



By Kathryn Boland

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Urbanity Dance presented a diverse bill of daring works in $F=ma$ on Friday, June 1st at the Boston University Tsai Performance Center. In a pre-show talk, artistic director Betsi Graves explained the double-meaning behind the title of the evening: $F=ma$ is both a physical law that connects with the force of a dancing body (force = mass x acceleration) and a reference to the act of empowering female choreographers (F for feminine) with a platform to share their work and put forth their voices.

“Embodying Core Essence,” choreographed by Nailah Randall-Bellinger, was a highlight of the first act. Dancers Jacob Regan and Alexander Davis were fully committed, both physically and emotionally. Topless, they wore only simple green pants, which began to build the work’s overall primal quality. Green-hued lighting, by Chris Fournier, matched this color to create a harmonious and monochromatic stage aesthetic. The work began with Davis moving in low space: lunging, gliding across the floor, and rolling through sitting.

The Regan joined him in higher space, on the other side of the stage. The oppositional tension between them was tangible. This feeling continued through many powerful phrases and moments. One dancer leaned into the other to then fall into a lunge. In contrast, at another moment Regan fell from an arabesque to have Davis catch him. At another point they held hands, with arms raised overhead in saute arabesque. Later, from sitting, they turned while back-to-back, using their feet to propel them: simple and mundane in theory, but in practice quite intriguing.

They were graceful and intuitive in this partnering, seeming to understand each other's physical nuances. However, their unison work, in sections when they were separated in space, could have been more crisp and consistent. This stuck out as a result of their overall strong execution of the movement and physical presence. Even so, the primal physical truth of the work, as a whole, left me captivated.

Jacob Regan and Alexander Davis in Nailah Randall-Bellinger's "Embodying Core Essence."
Photo credit: Mickey West.

Closing the first act was "Strategically Hiding", choreographed by Jackie Nowicki — a demonstration of female unity, and intriguingly, individuality. The two qualities co-existed, as did strength and ease. Harmonious formations and smooth partnering conveyed unity. Illustrating individuality were costumes in different cuts of the same fabric and color. There was also a sense that every dancer moved in her natural movement signature. It felt like a call to all in attendance to strive for such a balance, yet in no way was the message heavy-handed or moralizing.

The naturalistic movement was dotted with the movement motif of arabesques and attitudes. They were smoothly integrated and successful at illustrating social and emotional dynamics between dancers. Stop-and-go timing created staccato moments that were very compelling. In one more theatrical section a quasi-catwalk beckoned her fellow dancers, to walk in a stylized way, hands on hips. The others followed, and they walked in a perfect line.

With their individualized costumes, they could have been models. It seemed to fit into the context of the piece as demonstrative of the plethora of possibilities for women: to not pay attention to fashion, or to model it, or anything in between. The important takeaway was each dancer standing confidently in her own truth.

These six women carried that confident individuality through every step, turn, leap, and moment of stillness. They jetted out of the runway line to execute other athletic, compelling movements. Another effective section saw most of the dancers dancing low and on the floor, and a soloist dancing much higher – reaching, leaping and moving singular joints from standing up tall. Rather than any social dynamic, this seemed to be about energy in space and the tension of opposites.

What didn't feel so clear or effective was a clear substance wrapping around their heads – on soon after the beginning, and off just before the model-walk section. This would seem to signify smothering, silencing, and overall disempowerment. Yet nothing else in the work matched those themes.

On the contrary, empowerment and individual voice ringing clear seemed to rise to the top in this work. Rather than trying to make a sociopolitical point, the dancers simply enjoyed standing and moving in their own strength together.

The ensemble of Jackie Nowicki's "Strategically Hiding." Photo credit: Mickey West

Closing the night was Camille A. Brown's "New Second Line." Brown is a new dance icon, so it was pleasantly surprising to see her work in this show. The piece was fun, suave, and smooth. Second lines parades are specific to New Orleans and this work adapted the joy, movement, and brassy music of the institution to another unique aesthetic. Helping to build this, an intriguing visual aesthetic came from a combination of black costumes and red-hued lighting.

Jazz music laid a foundation for quick, accented movement. Pedestrian phrases neatly folded into more technical turns and jumps. Spiraling turns, and shapes with the head reaching away from the pelvis, added a sense of continuity to otherwise staccato movement. Through it all, the dancers' pure joy felt infectious. I couldn't help but smile and breathe a little easier.

Other moments were simply wow-worthy, in the most fun possible way: one dancer hopped over the backs of three dancers in lunges and flat backs in a play on leap-frog. Moments like these referenced swing and jive dance traditions. Classic jazz dance signatures, including quick, parallel footwork as well as dragging preparations and traveling steps, were also present. African dance influence felt present from the sense of musicality, as well as overall groundedness, in the movement. Often, eclectic, "fusion" dance can feel disjointed and clunky, but Brown and these dancers avoided anything of the sort here. To end the work, the dancers formed a circle, joined forearms, and looked up. A spiritual feeling was clear, as if through dancing they had connected with their truest, strongest selves.

The work offered the high caliber of dancing of the night, without any of the other works' structural and performative issues. As such, it made for a good closer.

Urbanity Dance in Camille A. Brown's "New Second Line." Photo credit: Mickey West

Earlier in the show, in between two pieces, dancer Alexander Davis gave a short talk. He thanked audience members for coming, saying that they'd still be there dancing, without an audience, even if no one showed up. I just about believed that. It felt like these choreographers and dancers created this evening, and danced it, for the pure love of it, not for any accolades, and certainly not for fame, money, or to make any kind of grand point. That sort of dedication and love of one's craft can't help but be anything short of inspiring and enjoyable to experience.

