



By Corinne Imberski

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WASHINGTON -- On May 18, Dance Place presented Sharon Mansur/Impact Performance and Lesa McLaughlin/Dance in a joint program of dance. It was an evening of hopeful beginnings marked by numerous powerful opening sequences, but ultimately, I was often left unsatisfied by the dances in their entirety.

Mansur presented "Trajectory Altered Slightly" twice: first as a "set version" and later in the program as an "improvisational version." The set version started with stark yet powerful images. Four dancers performed short phrases ending in a tableau and a blackout. This structure was repeated several times, each time with different movement phrases, suggesting different outcomes for a similar trajectory. The rest of the dance that followed this promising beginning lacked the opening's clarity and coherence. The movement lacked phrasing, intention, and dynamics, and appeared unnecessarily hurried. This suggested to me that the material was directly set from an improvisational exercise, but with repetition and rehearsal, the organic flow and spontaneity was lost. Thus the unending movement was unsatisfying as it offered no ending to the multiple trajectories that were introduced.

The improvisational version of "Trajectory Altered Slightly" also started off enticingly. Dancers descended down the aisles carrying small transistor radios broadcasting barely audible news and weather reports. I was curious as to how this addition of sound would alter the movement choices of the dancers (the set version had no musical accompaniment), but once the dancers reached the stage, the radios were promptly shut off and set aside in the wings, replaced by Lucas Zarwell's sound improvisation. The movement improvisation that ensued was spastic and unfocused, and the four dancers showed little awareness of each other. However, when the dancers did come in contact and establish brief relationships, the result was often magical. One especially moving moment came when two performers fused together side by side as if magnetically drawn to one another. They melted to the floor while holding their ears to a transistor radio as if they were listening to the latest catastrophic news. One dancer lightly touched the other dancer on the head and then they went their separate ways. This purity of motion and emotion was extraordinary, but unfortunately was never again duplicated in this piece.

Mansur also presented "Still Life," a much more satisfying work in both its structure and execution. "Still Life" consisted of three improvised solos with a sound improvisation by Zarwell and a video backdrop by Todd Clark. Marcy Schlissel, costumed in bright yellow, began the piece by entering with an armful of lemons. She promptly dropped them all and they remained on the stage throughout the piece -- creating a still life installation. Schlissel seemed to be negotiating a way to put all the lemons back in her arms until she found a lemon hidden away in her pocket. With a wry smile, she pulled it out satisfied, as were we. In the second solo, Mare Hieronimus, draped in an electric blue, explored the tension created by her manipulations of a long piece of color-coordinated rope. The line and design created by Hieronimus were welcome additions to the evening of dance. The third soloist, Mansur, entered in a stunning feathery, red dress and matching scarf. Mansur gave the most riveting performance -- largely by standing still (the piece is called "Still Life" after all!). The power of stillness is often under-estimated, but Mansur definitely knows how to harness it. She spent a large portion of her solo standing just left of center-stage, regal in her red dress, and hinting at a Mona Lisa-esque smile. After I'd stared at her bewitching expression for quite a while, her confident stance drew my focus to her feet, which seemed rooted to the ground by countless lines of energy. Upon returning my attention to her face, I was struck by the realization that her head was now tilted and twisted upward -- a radical change that I never saw happen. It was a startling and thoroughly satisfying moment.

This performance marked a return to the stage by veteran dancer/choreographer Lesa McLaughlin. After a hiatus of several years, McLaughlin has resurrected her energetic and physically demanding dance style. She places the most demands on herself in her solo "Torn," using what appear to be two pieces of bright red fabric as a support system and as a visual representation of feeling divided between two forces. In a showcase for her amazing strength and control, she winds, weaves, and whirls herself into and around the fabric. By the end of the piece, she was exhausted by her struggle and walked away holding onto one piece of the fabric. As she pulled on the fabric, it became clear that the "two" pieces were actually one long piece folded in half. She finished the dance by pulling the fabric from its ceiling support, as it landed to the floor as one piece. What was "torn" was now one, but forever altered by the experience. Although McLaughlin performed quite admirably, a greater sense of desperation and anxiety would have made the performance more convincing. The music, supplied by The Fireman, was unremarkable, but also welcomingly and appropriately non-melodramatic.

McLaughlin also presented two group works, "Out of the Blue" and "Moving You." While these pieces offered plenty of challenges in the way of partnering and constantly changing directional facings, the overall performance was muted by choreographic incoherence and lack of depth in its performance. I got the feeling that the pieces were "about" something, but the message was not communicated. For example, "Out of the Blue" started with a series of duets: The

dancers sequentially replaced each other in a duet during intermittent blackouts, which created an illusion of one long, unbroken duet. Following the duets, the five dancers performed a long, unison section but showed no obvious connection or relationship between each other. What started as a powerful series of building blocks fizzled into a section of five dancers presenting the same movement at the same time, but with no sense of the comfort or strength that this community could have provided.