

The Seattle Times

Phffft! kicks off international dance fest in Seattle

By Michael Upchurch

Special to The Seattle Times - Nov. 14, 2008 - Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company

Last year when Seattle-based choreographer Cyrus Khambatta decided to throw an international dance festival, he showcased work from five countries.

This year he doubled it to 10.

The festivities opened Friday with a sampler from four of those countries: the U.S.A. (new work from Khambatta's Phffft! Dance Theater Company), Canada (MACHiNENOiSY Dance Society), Sweden (a surreal dance film called "Black Spaghetti") and Israel/Palestine (in collaboration with Seattle's Spectrum Dance Theater).

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday (Nov. 15-16), Seattle Center's Center House will be a hotbed of dance activity, featuring everything from video installations to interactive performance to straightforward dance.

Friday's program at Broadway Performance Hall (which repeats 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 16) boded well for the festival as a whole. The most satisfying portion? Phffft!'s "The People's Project," taking inspiration from videotaped dance suggestions from four sources: a surfer couple, a recent divorcée, a "serial entrepreneur," and Phffft! dancer Chris McAllister.

McAllister — who on video recalled dancing as a kid to any sound around him, including the washing machine — came up with a fizzy, intricate trio for three plainly garbed women enduring some dangerous encounters with red stiletto heels. McAllister used crisply phased movement, parodied peepshow swagger and cleverly timed blackouts as he built up the piece. The result was both frothy and bracing.

Khambatta choreographed the other three sections, working special magic with a duet for wooden chair and dancer Morgan Nutt, who took her cue from the notion that there's nothing as lonesome as feeling all alone inside a marriage.

Newcomer Nutt made strong impressions elsewhere too, notably in a supple solo in Khambatta's witty take on "serial entrepreneurship." The entire Phffft! company demonstrated smooth partnering skills and fluid ensemble work that belied the strength and precision timing they took to execute.

Vancouver's MACHiNENOiSY are a duo who mixed text and movement in a piece called "Self Less." The fragmented text, blending playground memories and contemporary urban angst, was ho-hum — but the body language wasn't. The interlacing of tumbling limbs and torsos revealed two performers who know each other inside out.

Phffft! and MACHiNENOiSY also delivered a collaboration, "Un/Common Ground," a nicely crafted bauble whipped up in six hours. Five dancers in tight formation shuffled, twitched and just generally stayed busy, while three wild-card figures cut disruptive trajectories through their midst.

Goofier still was Johan Forsman and Lea Martini's film, "Black Spaghetti," which asked, among other questions: Why won't broccoli stand up and act like a tree when you want it to?

Spectrum closed the show with a brief excerpt from its upcoming "Chekhovian Resolution" inspired by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this collaboration between Spectrum artistic director Donald Byrd, Israeli choreographers Nir Ben Gal and Liat Dror and Palestinian composer-musician Wissam Murad, four couples made exacting use of rectangular space. The always amazing Hannah Lagerway again proceeded as if all human bodies (Patrick Pulkrabek's in this case) were meant for her to climb.

Look for more on "A Chekhovian Resolution" in this coming Friday's paper.