

The Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival

By Jessica Bonenfant Coogan

Wellspring Theater in the Epic Center

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The Midwest RAD Fest was, in fact, pretty rad! Kalamazoo's Regional Alternative Dance Festival, produced by Wellspring Cori Terry & Dancers, offered a sampler of dance spanning DC to Denver with the majority of dance makers hailing from the Great Lakes region. But I have to ask: alternative to what? Most works fell somewhere on the spectrum of current American concert dance trends. Wellspring, now in their 33rd season, presented a strong cross-section of what is happening in dance in the Midwest. Works with a clear classical modern lineage to somewhat experimental performance were represented on the program. Variety was not lacking – there was dance theatre, improvisation and even some contemporary modern-meets-jazz in the mix. The weekend-long festival included two Dance on Camera showings, two days of master classes and performances, a panel discussion, as well as a youth performance on Sunday. The festival, now in its fifth year, provides an excellent opportunity for dance makers to engage with each other, exchange ideas, and connect with the Kalamazoo community. While some participating choreographers have their fingers on the pulse of the Chicago scene, other equally excellent artists are based in more isolated college towns. As a New York City transplant to middle America myself, the significance of connecting with other artists resonated deeply.

The panel discussion was the cornerstone of the festival, providing context and offering dialogue about current issues faced by dance makers. The timely and problematic issue of defining what we do as dance makers—and what to call dance created today—surfaced in Saturday's dialogue, which was moderated by Ebbot Dance Project director Sarah Yanney-Chantanasombut. Panelist Rebecca Bryant, a professor at Purdue, suggested calling the work of today Current Dance. Washington D.C. based David Burkholder suggests changing the label based on the material, and the context of the conversation. Improviser Kent DeSpain suggests he is a “slash artist,” meaning contemporary-slash-modern-slash-postmodern, looking for whichever elicits a response. Yanney-Chantanasombut asked the choreographers how they engage with audiences, and for their thoughts on the responsibility for audience development and education. While Bryant prefers to assume her audience knows more than she does, panelist Kelly Ferris Lester, a professor at Southern Mississippi shared positive experience using sound bytes that offer a nugget of information about what is about to be seen, especially when the audience is new to dance. Burkholder discussed removing the distance between performers and viewers by breaking the fourth wall. His company creates site specific performances, such as a three-hour guided hike with performances happening along the way. Other hot topics of conversation included the use of social media, copyrighting choreographic

work, using copyrighted music, and the relationship of dance and music in the creative process. As modes of creating dance have become so collaborative, Sarah asked, how do choreographers define authorship of the work: Choreographed, devised, directed, in collaboration with the dancers. Experiences range from highly specific and exacting choreography to improvisational structures that leave a lot of freedom inside. Can we assume non-practitioners are in the know? Is it enough to say that without the choreographer's vision and direction, the work would not exist? I was left pondering how to communicate about this vast art form whose vocabulary appears to be situational.

Wellspring's Cori Terry set the scene for Friday's sold-out performance with *Give and Take Away*. The dancers, brightly clad, formed sculptural shapes that moved through space like a series of photographic images. Frequently in pairs, they performed a universalized story of shifting relationship with great receptivity. Elizabeth Shea also approached relationship in *All Into My Arms*, a sensual duet between two women who could not keep their bodies apart – even when separated by boxes of light cast onto the stage. Moving with sincerity, the women caress and support each other with a beautiful earnestness and intimacy. Sandwiched between these two works was the compelling Leslie Dworkin, who fully embodied the masculine sensitivity of her lovelorn vaudevillian character in her solo *The Beast*. The first night of the program yielded a lot of piano-meets-ambient electronic music, so the raucous sounds of Amy Wilson's *Entreechat Six* were a welcome diversion. The six sleep-deprived, pillow-punching, grooving women were on edge – formidable as they restlessly swung their hips and rocked out their insomniac aggravation. *The Space Between*, by Ashley Deran, showcased two spirited women in black flamenco-ish attire against gypsy sounding strings. With sly humor, they irritated, manipulated and interrupted each other, creating a charming conflict and becoming one weird creature. It was like they loved to hate each other.

Saturday evening, Boulder's Joanna Rotkin busted down the fourth wall and stole the show, before it even started. As I entered the space she was standing on a blue cooler holding a running Dustbuster, chatting about cleaning, and welcoming guests. Over the course of her outrageous and politically loaded performance Rotkin convinces an audience member to hold a chunk of raw meat and makes candy fall from the sky. She deconstructs the performance live, telling the audience everything that is going to happen—though when it does happen it is still surprising. Her petite frame and generous physicality, coupled with her direct engagement with the audience, make it impossible to take your eyes off her. Rotkin was not the only one to cross into audience territory. Improviser Sharon Mansur presented the audience with pouches filled with sound in here layered and mysterious work *Insert [] Here*. The audience pressed them to their ears and listened to breath, or the tinkling of a music box. Also an improviser, Daniel Burkholder began by asking a woman in the front row to recall a place that made her happy (Florida) and then made a dance for her on the spot. The second section of the work centers on Burkholder's story, which is full of uplifting sincerity and full, thoughtful movement.

Also on Saturday was Rebecca Bryant's brilliant *Suite Female: Parts II-VIII*. The sections are presented out of sequence with clever projected titles like: The Common Loon, or the Woman who Knew Too Much. Five bird-like women flock and preen against a cacophony of whispers and birdcalls. They set and reset antique lamps that invite silhouettes and shadow puppets. *Suite Female* succeeds in joining philosophical questions with a carefully considered kinesthetic vocabulary.

Many Rad Fest works would have benefited from further development. For instance, Rodney A. Brown created a highly specific and mechanized world full of downcast eyes, synchronized breath and intriguing gestures in *Potters (seeds then wheats)*, but the costumes seemed an afterthought and the structure disintegrated toward the end. Julie-Ann Gambino gave a stunning performance in her solo *How Will I Stand*. With gorgeous physicality, Gambino struggled to stay upright. Her floor work – at times reptilian, or as an inverted quadruped reminiscent of a young fawn – was something I could watch all day. Whenever she managed to right herself, it was familiar and less engaging. The end, a plain walk offstage into a bright light, felt tacked on and disconnected from her tremendous journey. Gambino was not alone in the struggle to find a strong ending. Too many dances ended with exits that felt unsupported by the development of their structure. *Running in the Dark*, a tactile treatise on touch, was performed with intense focus. Choreographed by Kathleen Dalton, it explored every angle of sensory contact: tentative touch that fizzles out, stroking the hair, fingers that crawl, yearning to be touched, touch that gives life, and touch that is unwanted. Unfortunately, the work is peppered with unnecessary blackouts and entrances and exits that lack clear motivation. Works like these have promise, and these choreographers simply need nurturing.

The one thing missing from Rad Fest is a platform for critical feedback. The majority of the dances were created in the last year or so and are likely to be performed again. Our ephemeral art form is one of frequent revision, and the festival is a golden opportunity for dialogue with audiences and peers. Some kind of response process could be valuable for the choreographers. Not only would it further this beautifully budding sense of community, but it would only make the work coming out of the Midwest stronger – maybe next year Rad Fest?