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Review: Spectrum Dance Theater delivers meaty moves, but the audio trimmings are too much

Seattle's Spectrum Dance Theater delivers the moves with "The Mother of Us All" — but some of the trimmings are overkill.

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DANCE REVIEW |

The dancing and dancers are better than ever. The blend of sound collage, live music and spoken word is appealing in theory. And the topic addressed — the heritage, problems and promise of Africa — is meaty.

But Donald Byrd's "The Mother of Us All" doesn't draw you in as much as you wish it would, even as its dance moves dazzle you.

"Mother" is the final installment in Byrd's trilogy of large-scale works addressing geopolitical issues: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ("A Chekhovian Resolution"), U.S.-Chinese relations ("Farewell") and now Africa. As in the earlier productions, the audience is seated on risers on stage, surrounding the dancers on three sides.

The show gets off to a striking start when Ty Alexander Cheng and Tory Peil loom into view from the last place you'd expect (best not to give it away). Soon other dancers follow, as if emerging from an underworld.

The air fills with musical fragments, ambient street sounds and a series of talking heads holding forth on the challenges facing Africa. The sound tableau, composed by Byron Au Yong, mixes recorded material with Kane Mathis performing live on the kora (West African harp) and some laptop wizardry by Au Yong himself.

Spoken text, delivered by Marsha Nyembesi Mutisi, and some nimble lighting design and staging effects (Jack Mehler) complete the picture. None of it, though, can match the central power of the dancers — especially Cheng and Kylie Lewallen.

Dance fans who saw this pair in Whim W'Him's recent "Monsters" should be advised that "Monsters" offered only a thumbnail sample of what these two can do with their home company. It's not just their impeccable form and the fluid strength with which they deliver Byrd's sometimes speedy, sometimes languid partnering acrobatics. It's their powers of endurance, too, in a piece that runs a little over an hour without a break.

And they're not alone. Vincent Lopez, in several sequences, pushes dance to its outermost athletic possibilities, while Amber Mayberry, Sarah Poppe and Meaghan Sanford, in a series of relay-race-style solos, combine spiky extensions, abrupt body dives and backward rolls, all with microphone in hand as they mimic the cacophony in the background.

It's that aural backdrop that's the problem, however. Au Yong divides his score into distinct sections, but he shapes each one so similarly that the effect is monotonous. Mathis' kora is usually lost in the mix. The news analysts/politicians/foreign-policy experts are layered over one another, with some phrases audible and some lost in the shuffle. After a while, you just want to tune them out and concentrate on the dance ... which kind of means tuning out "Africa," because it's only subliminally present in the choreography.

It's admirable that Byrd has tried his hand at addressing global issues through dance — but his strength is in exploring more personal, internal worlds, to which his performers bring not just dance prowess but remarkable acting skills as well.