

Style

Young Canadian choreographer brings promising works to Dance Place

By Rebecca Ritzel March 15

As fans of contemporary dance know, you can try to have a conversation about leading young American female choreographers, but talking about leading *North* American female choreographers is much more interesting.

Canadian gen-Xers Crystal Pite and Aszure Barton consistently rank among the most compelling dancemakers on the continent. Each recently brought her respective company to Rockville's American Dance Institute, and each has had works performed locally by high-caliber companies, such as Alvin Ailey and Cedar Lake. Looking to follow closely behind her countrywomen is the young Québécois choreographer Helen Simoneau, whose five-year-old company made its D.C. debut Saturday at Dance Place.

Like Pite and Barton, Simoneau smartly incorporates design concepts and narrative threads into her work and seeks to collaborate with composers and other artists. She may lack Pite's and Barton's sharp focus and facility for abstract storytelling, but all three of her works onstage showed promise.

In the “The Task of Doing,” five gilt picture frames were suspended from the ceiling at the rear of the stage so that four dancers could both stand behind them, peering out like voyeurs, and preen in front of them, seemingly unhappy with what they saw in imaginary mirrors.

The insecurity continued even when the quartet was dancing uniform movements center stage. Although all were strong movers, they kept stealing sideways glances, as if checking to see whether another dancer could hold an arabesque balance longer or execute a cooler freestyle vogue. This idea of dancing in sync as a self-conscious competition — despite the dancers’ varied body types and gender — was fascinating, so it was a shame that a series of what appeared to be quotidian gestures such as opening and closing bottles distracted from Simoneau’s framework, as did the overly screechy commissioned music for a string quartet.

“Midnight Parade (for Two)” featured Kayla Farrish and Montgomery County native Ariel Freedman in a trippy post-clubbing adagio. Dressed in black and white tops and brightly colored boy shorts, the two smoothly bopped around and supported each other like best friends coming home from a night out, perhaps inhabiting a hazy head space where they imagined having a better night on the dance floor than they actually did.

A contemplative solo by Simoneau completed the program. Lest there was any question about her national identity, she wore boots and a frayed faux-fur coat, revealed a fleur-de-lis arm tattoo and called the piece “Caribou.”

Ritzel is a freelance writer.