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Dance Review

Stories Told With a Twirl Here and a Leap There



Downtown Dance Festival Kristen Foote performing in Battery Park during this annual event.
Willie Davis for The New York Times

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Battery Park, with its views across the harbor and the Hudson River, should be one of New York's glories. Currently, however, it's a mess and a maze, and, with its palings and barriers, it looks like a no man's land. Trying to find the opening performance of the Downtown Dance Festival on Sunday proved so circuitous that I missed the opening troupe, Chapter Two. Once there, however, I sat contented for the remaining two and a half hours.

No, not all of the program contented me — some of it was immediately and repeatedly irksome — yet even those items that irritated could not efface the rare charm of sitting in the dappled shade of the park's plane trees. I left with a sensation larger than any one dance: an afterimage of space and light above and far beyond the stage.

The dance that best suited the location was José Limón's "Dances for Isadora" (1971), a series of four solos to Chopin, danced barefoot in a cream-colored chiton by Kristen Foote of the [Limón Dance Company](#). The vocabulary and idiom were exactly those attributed to Isadora Duncan: running, skipping, twirling, with dramatic gestures. The skill of these solos lay in Limón's phrasing, working around the music with marvelous timing, and in his grasp of Duncan's rapture. Photographs and written accounts capture her joy in dancing in the open air; Ms. Foote, with her projection and absorption, seemed true to that spirit.

And it was Limón's celebrated work "The Moor's Pavane" (1949) that proved the finest choreography of the afternoon. This piece, set to Purcell, is much admired for its retelling of Shakespeare's "Othello" within the formal constraints of Baroque social dance. Though I find it robs "Othello" of all its magnificence of thought and subtlety of construction, the elegance with which it makes the story tense and even inexcusable can still impress.

But "The Moor's Pavane" is often performed by ballet companies; my first view of it was with Rudolf Nureyev in the 1970s, and American Ballet Theater is scheduled to dance it in November at the David H. Koch Theater. In those circumstances, it invariably turns into ham. Sunday's performance reminded me how it works well only on a small stage with the audience at close quarters; a big theater quickly renders its histrionics flamboyant and blurs its dance detail.

All of Sunday's cast members — Raphaél Boumaila as the Moor, Ms. Foote in the Emilia role, Logan Frances Kruger as the Moor's wife — were admirable, very finely controlling the dance's suspense. The gripping performance was that of Dante Puleio as the Moor's Friend, hungrily alert in timing and dramatic focus.

No other complete performance I saw on Sunday was of much note. The three women and two men of Battery Dance Company, the festival's host troupe, performed Jacek Luminski's "Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost" (2013) efficiently, but the choreography passes through scores by three composers without showing any serious connection to any of them.

SLK Ballet's students did three 19th-century ballet numbers with pleasantly neat, clean style. Still, the pas de trois of odalisques from "Le Corsaire" needs more upper-body allure and pliancy if it is to look more than routine, while the four "Swan Lake" cygnets need pas de chat of uniform crispness.

Dancing Earth performed Rulan Tengen's idea of indigenous American idioms, "Walking on the Edge of Water," which featured various shades of azure fabric, striking white or blue patterns painted on the skin, and terra-cotta bowls. Though it had changing patterns and suggestions of drama, its structure meandered, and its rhythms were never arresting.

Vendetta Mathea (originally from Detroit but a French resident for 30 years) performed her "Water Soul" (2013) with the three dancers of her French company. This began, and continually reverted to, a loathsome array of exercises in mime cuteness. The dancers laughed silently, looked at an invisible object up to one side, grieved, stirred unseen pots — all with that polished French delivery that shows you what a tremendous favor the performers are doing you with their energetic charm. The dance movements, considerably less focused and precise, were wholly devoid of interest.

*The Downtown Dance Festival continues through Thursday in Lower Manhattan;
batterydance.org/ddf_festival.htm.*