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Triumphant Dorrance Dance at The Wallis

Adam Leipzig · Monday, October 16th, 2017

How do we find coherence in our world, in our lives? That's the overarching question explored by Dorrance Dance in their revolutionary, exuberant performance at The Wallis this past weekend.

Michelle Dorrance, a MacArthur Fellow, reinvents the art of tap dance. Percussive sounds motivate movements. Rhythm, even disjunctive rhythm, is the starting point for Dorrance's choreography; expressed first through feet and bodies, then through music, then formed into a coherent whole unifying physical and audio — motion and sound, physical form and invisible waves.

We feel as though we are watching the process of differentiation, the process of the embryonic self coming into being. Dorrance is unafraid to have her dancers move in spasm. Spasmodic muscle contraction — in the middle ages was it called St. Vitus dance — appears in each of the three pieces presented here. A dancer collapses to the floor, twitching, his muscles operated by neutral pathways void of self-direction. Gradually, painfully, his limbs begin to articulate orderly movement. We're witnessing the birth of choreography.

Three pieces comprised the 70-minute program. *Jungle Blues* presents the most traditional version of Dorrance's jazz-tap origins, with the full company offering different styles the way jazz soloists strut their stuff. But even here tradition is upended, as awkwardness and angular forms take stage. Following is the breathtaking *Three To One*, a trio piece featuring Dorrance in taps at center, with barefoot men on her right and left. We feel the primacy of bodily percussion, the roots history of tap dance and America's history of race, and the unifying power of feet and bodies unstrung from gender or ethnicity.



Dorrance Dance performing Three to One at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (The Wallis). Pictured (l-r): Byron Tittle, Michelle Dorrance, and Matthew "Megawatt" West. Photo credit: Kevin Parry for The Wallis.

The evening concludes with the West Coast premiere of the full-length *Mylenation*. It's the culmination of what has gone before, as the full company moves through the process of developing and discovering coherence. Mylenation is an anatomical term referring to the formation of sheaths around our nerves, sheaths that allow the effective and rapid transmission of information through the body. In this final dance, we watch mylenation embodied.

Michelle Dorrance, herself, is the prime performer of her work. With her tall, angular figure, precise tap strikes, and whip-turned head, she's a model of precision and grace. The entire

company is similarly precise and perfectly coordinated — a rare pleasure to see on stage in LA.

Kudos to The Wallis, once again, for bringing us work that challenges and delights, and points toward artistic futures.

Top image: Dorrance Dance performing the West Coast premiere of Myelination at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (The Wallis). Pictured (l-r): Byron Tittle and Michelle Dorrance. Photo credit: Kevin Parry for The Wallis.

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