

Spectrum Dance Theater: Avant-Garde on the Lake
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In case you didn't know, we have cutting edge contemporary dance emerging from the Madrona Bath House on Lake Washington! In that unassuming space, Donald Byrd, internationally renowned choreographer and director of Spectrum Dance Theater since 2002, creates performances that combine experimental, but classically grounded, choreography with deep emotional content. Byrd believes that art is not just entertainment, but that, at its best, it "enlivens" and "transforms" people. His choreography builds on multiple sources, classical, modern, vernacular, pop, and spiritual.

As we watch his extraordinary company of dancers perform, we witness the extraordinary possibilities of the human body to express feeling through movement. In fact, according to one dancer I spoke with, Byrd's movements sometime takes the dancers themselves beyond what they thought they could do. Likewise, Byrd speaks of responding to the physical diversity of the dancers and what they bring to a piece. The website explains that these dancers "occupy the space where the classical, contemporary, intuitive, cerebral, visceral, right brain, left brain, control and abandonment converge." Wow. That is stunning. Their movements shape suggested narratives in ever changing relationships to space and gravity, tension and relaxation, compression and expansion.

Byrd's aesthetically compelling choreography works in tandem with carefully chosen music that is global, contemporary, and classical. The music is part of the experience, not simply an accompaniment. Byrd creates structures that allow you to "enter into" the music, as he puts it. He can listen to music for months and then choreograph a work quickly and intuitively.

As a pioneering African American dancer (he danced with the Alvin Ailey company for two years, another norm shattering African American choreographer) he began to think about race in relationship to his choreography early on. One example is the 1996 *Harlem Nutcracker* (I would like to see that performed here!). This year his season "#RACEish," "an exploration of America's 240 years of (failed) race relations" foregrounds race (other season have been "Love" and "War").

"#RACEish" began with a panel on "Invisible: The Dilemma of the Black Artist in America." Prominent cultural leaders Barbara Thomas and Valerie Curtis-Newton addressed the contradictions of creativity as a generative force that is not racial, at the same time that leaders in the creative community who happen to be African American in Seattle have to deal with white perspectives that they can only perform in the context of their race; they are still invisible as part of the mainstream still dominantly white culture, unless the white culture is "looking" for black representatives.

Two performances in late February foreground African American creativity "Rambunctious 2.0" with all African American composers including the little known T.J. Anderson. Anderson's music combines the vernacular and the spiritual with avant-garde musical sounds that reminded me of Stravinsky. Byrd's choreography sparks from that score a poignant and intense piece called "Spirit Songs."

The second program "Dance, Dance, Dance," explores the little acknowledged "Africanist" aesthetic in mainstream music and modernism. According to Byrd, unrecognized African rhythms and movements

(“angularity, coolness, pelvis thrusting and jutting, and rhythm”) imbue George Balanchine’s choreography. In early May, a “Rap on Race” will build around a 1970s conversation between anthropologist Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, in an unconventional format developed by actress Anne Devere Smith and Byrd. Finally in late June “the Minstrel Show Revisited” a difficult confrontational work deals directly with racist stereotypes in the minstrelsy tradition, a tradition that actually continues to the present in many ways. That program forces the audience to engage with racism directly.

Spectrum Dance Theater was founded in 1982 with a commitment to diversity in both its dancers and its audiences. Today, we still see more dancers of color in Spectrum performances than any other company in Seattle. Byrd’s own willingness throughout his career to address racism as one theme of his choreography culminates in the current season. At the same time, his work always speaks to humanity and to the human experience. His approach to foregrounding race in these works is to demonstrate that African American roots and creators are a major nutritive force in contemporary life. But his purpose is not to segregate that force, but to integrate our understanding of contemporary creativity. Dance has a great capacity to embrace both the specific and the universal because its abstract form and movement is generated by the human body.

Spectrum today actively promotes dance in the community, not only with its own school that teaches hundreds of students from toddlers to grandmothers, but also with many outreach programs to public schools. Byrd fervently believes that the arts, far from the marginal position into which they are being gradually isolated, are central to the community, that they provide solutions to the challenges of our contemporary world.

We can all support these blazing artistic talents in our midst and ensure that Spectrum Dance Theater continues to be the most exciting venue in Seattle for dance that engages social issues and community involvement, by coming to their provocative performances and allowing ourselves to be transformed.

A special treat also awaits those who come to the Spectrum Gala “Movement” on April 16. The theme of the evening will be celebrating the Civil Rights Era. The advanced students from Spectrum’s Academy will present a special program based on their own choreography that explores their personal experiences of racism.