

REVIEW

Intensity and innovation on two Toronto stages

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Dollhouse

Canadian Stage/Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie

At Berkeley Street Theatre, Toronto

ProArteDanza Season 2016

At Fleck Dance Theatre in Toronto

Only a certain calibre of performer can be riveting in stillness. Dancer/choreographer Bill Coleman is clearly of this calibre. The first sequence of his unclassifiable, very funny and often mesmerizing *Dollhouse*, now playing at Canadian Stage's Berkeley Street Theatre, has him staring out at the audience under brightening house lights, doing ... well, we aren't sure what.

Standing in front of a dizzying clutter of props, Coleman's eyes widen inquisitively as he begins to react to sounds around the room. His long, lanky body starts to creak and crack. It sounds as if his bones are made of glass and, as he contorts, buckles and collapses, every limb seems to break against itself. (Turns out, his suit is stuffed with plastic glassware.) The routine – which falls somewhere between *Seinfeld's* Kramer and something out of Samuel Beckett – has Coleman lose so much control that he knocks over a table covered in laptops and ends up tap dancing through a mound of mousetraps, each one snapping against his toes.

Dollhouse, a duet between Coleman and experimental composer Gordon Monahan, is an hour-long immersion into a hyper-sensory world in which sound, light and movement volley between chaos and control. As an artist, Coleman has honed a practice that uses an “embodied cognitive state” to explore movement, while Monahan is interested in various ways of deconstructing/reconstructing sound. If that has the ring of the esoteric, the performance doesn't present as such because it's both lighthearted and beautiful, creating images of joy and suffering alongside a

remarkable range of noises, generated by things like bowls of water and ECG electrodes attached to Coleman's bare chest. At one point, Coleman dons a blazer covered in arrows (designed by artist Edward Poitras) and floats through darkness. At another, he is enraptured in the middle of a simulated rainstorm. Some sequences might go on too long, but I almost welcomed a little downtime in this intense and innovative work.

ProArteDanza's 2016 season features two high-energy pieces : a remount of Robert Glumbek's 2011 *Diversions* and the world premiere of artistic director Roberto Campanella's *Fearful Symmetries*.

Campanella's new work is a plucky, adrenalin extravaganza set to John Adams's eponymous big-band composition. The piece feels like a delightful abstraction of an early cinematic chase scene; there's a recurring motif of running on the spot that captures both the intensity and inevitability of the quick getaways in old movies. Campanella's propulsive group formations are layered with interesting choreographic detail, such as a forward, thrusting momentum from the dancers' heads and the repeated use of swan-shaped hands. There's atmospheric lighting (by Arun Srinivasan) that splits the stage in parts and allows for a sudden reinvention of the space, playing beautifully on the concept of symmetries. Campanella's synchronized group work is juxtaposed by bursts of gripping solo-dancing by Victoria Mehaffey, who is powerfully grounded and a pleasure to watch.

The ensemble looked a little less polished in Glumbek's *Diversions*, set to industrial music by Marconi Union and unfolding on a dark stage obscured by dry ice. While I admired the unrelenting energy of the choreography, and some of the high-powered partnering work, the piece's undertones of violence felt a little unresolved. In sequences that placed couples side by side, the women thrashed their legs, as though trying to escape their male partner. Later, female dancers appeared tossed from the wings, landing in dancer Daniel McArthur's arms. I felt as though this imagery of struggling and flailing female bodies needed to be more contextualized.

Dollhouse runs at *Berkeley Street Theatre* until Nov. 20; *ProArteDanza's* double bill continues at the *Fleck Dance Theatre* until Nov. 19.

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