

Dancers take the stage with grace

Lighting, set design accentuated dancers' costumes, movements

By Aileen Socrates
Old Gold and Black Reviewer

A dynamic collaboration of faculty and students on the Mainstage was displayed Nov. 19-21. Challenged by an incongruous assortment of pieces, the university Dance Company, along with technical standouts Jonathan Christman, a theater designer, and Lisa Weller, the costume room supervisor, exhibited impressive versatility and strength in this year's Fall Faculty/Guest Artist Concert.

Carol Johnson's "Shadows," the opening piece, presented a harmonious synthesis of theatrical elements that pervaded all successive pieces in the concert.

The piece's first image was bathed completely in hues of blue. Shaded by a partially transparent tapedstry, the blue-clad dancers, aligned vertically, moved slowly and sequentially to the lucid music.

Minimal lighting illuminated the dancers and produced the shadow-like effect that was the signature of the piece.

"Shadows" speaks blatantly of Johnson's talent as a choreographer. She is not only a creative artist as a dancer, but exhibits extreme sensitivity to her musical selection. In "Shadows," Johnson left no musical nuance unexplored.

She collaborated directly with the music, extracting all extraneous movement to expose a piece that embodied the core of what her audience was hearing.

Johnson's beginning choreography paired the serenity of the music with the fluidity of movement. Appropriately and obscurely, these movements evolved with the whimsical music, embracing the *petite allegro* of high-energy ballet and the breath-like quality of the *adagio*.

The music culminated with bright lights flooding the stage, and the dancers — with smiles of liberation — scampered joyously and unabashedly across the stage.

Humbly accompanying the music, Johnson's "Shadows" was a triumphant and synergetic spectacle of music, dance, light and costume.

The university's own Nina Lucas, the director of dance, answered Carol Johnson's challenge with two tantalizing and contrasting selections, "Hunting" and "Nightbird." "Hunting," underscored by the percussive rhythm of "Deep Forest," pulsated with primitive themes.

Despite the cacophonous music, Lucas brought a unity to the piece through a series of potent, yet flowing motifs. The dancers were both ethereal and powerful.

Strenuous choreography dominated "Nightbird." In this piece, dancers created eloquent lines in partner formations, bearing one

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another's weight flawlessly and with grace.

Lucas's choreography attested to the remarkable strength and control of this particular group of dancers. Weller accentuated these qualities through flesh-toned, ethnic costumes that transformed them into sensuous, primitive goddesses.

With "Walk the Talk," a three movement jazz piece, choreographer Cynthia Penn-Henderson took to the city. Christman casted the urban skyline against the midnight black backdrop, and in unison, dancers entered to complete this city scene.

Penn-Henderson's jazz choreography modeled the sass and confidence of the modern urban woman. Set to Celine Dion's "Treat Her Like a Lady," Penn-Henderson's choreography and dancers demanded nothing less than the diva songstress herself.

The middle movement of "Walk the Talk" personified not the vitality of woman, but her acute vulnerability. In the music of Eva Cassidy, soloist Lauren Hurst's lengthy lines and willowy movement quality brought tenderness to Penn-Henderson's choreography.

Through Hurst's performance, Penn-Henderson depicted both the indignant resignation and the gentle yearning of separation. Blown and battered by invisible hands, the audience, like Hurst, is stirred by the honesty of Penn-Henderson's choreography.

Returning to the glamour of the Penn-Henderson's first piece, the dancers wrapped the first half of the concert with a selection from the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Like the Artist himself, the choreography, with abstract arm movements, was elusive and mysterious.

Provocative and rapturous, the dancers lounged, glided, and balanced on small stools. A celebration of the female spirit, "Walk the Talk" was sleek, soft and enjoyable.

The second half of the program was marked by two pieces from polar ends of the dance spectrum. Appropriately, choreographer Diane Markham began "Terminal Transitions" with routine flight information given by an airport employee.

The dancers entered carrying suitcases, and began to move in silence until Cheryl Woodin, the first soloist, took the stage. Trapped within the mind of a tormented passenger,

Woodin thrashed erratically.

Frenetically, the delicate Woodin scooped invisible pieces of her life in her hand, personifying the anxiety-ridden passenger during the pre-flight waiting period.

The three dancers in Woodin's immediate footsteps were no less preoccupied than she. Christman's intricate, pipe-like lighting design exemplified the exact kind of oppression and haphazardness that permeated Markham's choreography. Markham's choreography was highly symbolic, conjuring themes of time passing through clockwork movements.

The trio seemed locked within the lighting, exhaustedly glancing at surroundings that seem to close in upon them as time passes. Despairingly, they grappled to break through these walls with forward movements, and defeated, they leaned on one another for support.

Fortunately, soloist and final terminal passenger Stephanie Hudson escaped from these confining movements.

Glowing with the sophistication of the upper class 1920s traveler, she sat, legs crossed, on her suitcase. The tone of Markham's choreography altered almost completely.

Hudson's gestures were much more frivolous — the coquettish glance over her shoulder, the light dusting of the knee with her hand. The last bit of choreography was peculiarly incongruous with the main theme, but a final announcement from the airport official bound, though abruptly, the three short pieces together.

Following these darker themes of "Terminal Transitions" was the classical brilliance of "Waltz of the Flowers." The illustrious lighting painted a cool forestry scene that contrasted dramatically with Weller's colorful bouquet of costumes.

Re-staged by former American Ballet Theatre soloist Fanchon Cordell for the University Dance Company, Lev Ivanov's choreography was timeless. With an impressive debut in last year's Faculty/Guest Artist concert, "Waltz of the Flowers" soloist Kendall Scully retained her commanding presence on stage. In this and other pieces, her developed technique, strength and stamina is incessantly consistent.

Once more, this year's guests and faculty artists have created a striking collage of choreography, and again, University Company dancers have been successful co-creators of their work.

With utmost attentiveness to both the technical and artistic aspects of performance, these prolific artists were ceaseless in grace and creativity.

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Tom Hanks (left), Matt Damon and Maximilian Martini (right) star in Steven Spielberg's latest production, *Saving Private Ryan*. The film examines World War II through the eyes of a band of soldiers searching for a soldier who has lost his brothers in the war. The movie will be shown in Pugh Auditorium in the Benson University Center at 8 and 10 p.m. Dec. 4-6.

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