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Photo: Bill Hebert

SHARPening the Focus

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

The title of SHARP Dance Company's *Four Hot Men and an Old Lady* hinted at the show's range of choreographers: four guest artists and artistic director Diane Sharp-Nachsin, who is hardly "old." Perhaps it alluded to her long performance career in various Pennsylvania dance companies. The "four hot men," in contrast, presented new perspectives. All works expressed kernels of insight, but two of them fully captured my attention.

Kevin Ferguson's *Awakenings* presented a series of vignettes. Dressed in black and bathed in a center spotlight, the full company encircled a figure, moving their arms in unison like a slow blooming flower. They were a community, mutually supportive as the dancer took the focus with large, fluid movements. She approached members of the group, offering the spotlight in exchange for a place on the circle. I began to recognize a gesture common among the central dancers. Amidst the flowing movement, a hand would sneak up to cover the mouth or the eyes, suggesting a reluctance to speak or see. The gesture was fleeting, but with repetition comes meaning, so my eyes sharpened on the image.

A solo voice sang a weary blues "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" forming a duet with a solo dancer. Out of a frenzy of leaps and turns, the dancer stopped and slowly lowered her body to the floor in a 16-count hinge, suspending time as she descended into a saddened heap.

The final moments mirrored the first: a group united around a circle. The spotlight defined the space as the company stepped out of it, leaving one who turned her back on the audience and blurred into blackness. They were the same group of dancers but more connected, transformed by the journey.

One man. Enter one. Two men. Khakis. Belts. Shirts tucked in. Fluid with a touch of hip-hop. Awkward with a tendency to shake. Face

each other. Face away. He moves him. He runs away. Jump and twist. Running arms. Bounce. Fall. Repeat. They're men. They're people. They're a fragment of something bigger. They're Steven Vaughn's *Phantom Other(s)*. I'm curious. I'm intrigued. I lean forward hungry for more. Two men. Exit one. One man.

The show also included work by Charles Tyson Jr. and Joe Colter. Tyson's *No White Horses, No Happy Endings* featured a duet reminiscent of a romance gone wrong. The lighting altered with the changing moods of the choreography, red as the dancers portrayed a violent break up, blue as they reunited, white as they finally accepted separation. In *Chosen*, Colter created a memorable moment: three men walked directly downstage jabbing their fists downwards as if banging a timpani. While watching, I felt confronted by the dancers' ferocity and power. This feeling remained with me until the end of the piece.

Also on the program was an excerpt from the previous season's *Madness*, choreographed by Sharp-Nachsin. Projections created multiple images of the same dancers, suggesting mental deterioration as the images twitched out of sync. However, the excerpt ended abruptly, and the audience hesitated before offering sparse applause. Sharp-Nachsin's choreography closed the show with *White Rabbit* , a preview of SHARP's upcoming Woodstock-themed performance. The dancers' movements were relaxed and paired with a psychedelic projection flowing on the upstage cyclorama.

Overall, I was taken by the strength of the performers and their commitment to the choreography. Some of the works were stronger than others, but the lighting choices, use of projection, and the skill of the performers enhanced the evening, and ultimately I felt my focus SHARPen as I was pulled into each piece.

Four Hot Men and an Old Lady, SHARP Dance Company, Painted Bride Art Center, November 9-10.

By Kalila Kingsford Smith
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