

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Thomas Weir

cherchez la femme

by Sara Graybeal

Cherchez la femme, translated from French, means “look for the woman.” Originating in an Alexandre Dumas novel, the expression was crafted to explain erratic male behavior—whatever the problem, a woman can be found at the root of it. Under this rationale, the woman is temptress. The woman is sinner. The woman is in relation to the man.

Gathered under this inauspicious, clearly ironic title, *femme. collective*’s showcase at the Performance Garage resoundingly upended such tired tropes. Dancers took on many roles over the course of the evening: giggling preteen, earthy goddess, stifled ballerina, warrior. Many of these roles hinted at the toll of societal expectations on female psyches. But above all, the pieces positioned women in relation to themselves and each other.

“Le chemin,” at the end of the first half, started off eerie, with each woman seeming to occupy an independent sphere, leering at the audience while making swooping, almost ghostlike movements. By the end, the dancers had “found” each other, performing in lively unison and then collapsing at one end of the stage to pore, giggling, over a magazine. This moment, like others throughout the show, could easily have come off as contrived but did not. A sense of sincerity pervaded both the isolation and the companionship, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of real life, at least real life as a woman.

"Accompanied by:" spoke similarly to relationships between women. Dancers operated in pairs, with one woman wide-eyed and panting, in the throes of what resembled an anxiety attack, while the other orbited around her, tapping her arms and calming her distress. By the end of the piece, the caregivers had succumbed to panic, their partners quickly forced to become nurturers themselves. The theme of mutual female support was complicated by the fact that every dancer appeared lonely, near-miserable. In this context, the reversal of roles seemed less about healthy reciprocity and more about generations of wounds: how mothers raise children only to break down themselves. The piece was painful, and poignant, and true.

Other pieces directly addressed a male gaze. In "let me..." five women paced back and forth seemingly invisible to one another, each obsessed with the high heeled shoes littering the stage. They tried them on and took them off, enduring shoulder-shaking, head-rocking withdrawal after each removal of shoes. By the end, only one woman was left, bending as the lights faded to pick up yet another high heel. The moment was both predictable and moving, a precise depiction of the continual pressure upon women to please, to wear shoes that have already been proven to cause pain, to make another, and another, and yet another attempt at beauty.

Most of the show walked this careful line between subtle and explicit, giving enough of a narrative to provide tangible meaning without falling into cliché. Momentum lagged at the few places where this balance failed. Several of the solo acts lacked the sense of female-driven purpose embodied by the rest of the show, making them harder to connect with. On the other end of the spectrum, the final piece of the night, "unladylike," began with a startlingly direct monologue, problematizing terms like "ladylike" and "manly" before the dancing began. This cast the ensuing piece in an unfortunate aura of cliché that was hard to set aside despite a fast-paced, technically-impressive choreography—a call to arms for empowered, free-thinking women.

For the most part, though, *cherchez la femme* was a collage of earnestness, passion, and truth-telling, created by and for women. As the night ended, I thought again about the phrase "look for the woman." This, it struck me, was exactly what members of femme. collective had done: looked for the women within and outside themselves and created a show with what they found. The result, from this woman's perspective, was a rare and inspiring treat.

cherchez la femme, femme. collective, Performance Garage, February 12-13. <http://www.femmecollectivephilly.com/>

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