

Top-drawer Sola festival at Armstrong

Jim Farber DAILY BREEZE

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For shame! I would like to be able to report that Saturday's presentation of the 6th Annual Sola Contemporary Dance Festival at the James Armstrong Theatre in Torrance was a success in terms of its artistic quality and the enthusiastic support it garnered from a capacity audience. Unfortunately, I can only report that the first half of the equation proved true.

The work presented by eight local choreographers and their companies was consistently skilled, conceptually adventurous, and often on the cutting-edge of innovation. What was depressing was the number of empty seats; at least half; and the Armstrong is not a big theater. It does not speak well for a community that sees itself as an arts-friendly environment. That being said let me tell you what you missed.

At its core, the Sola Contemporary Dance Festival is a survey. As conceived and produced by Regina Klenjoski (whose dance company is in-residence at the Torrance Cultural Arts Center), Sola presents work by a variety of choreographers. The quality of the work is consistently high and is presented in the most professional manner featuring detailed costuming, atmospheric lighting and musical accompaniment.

This year the most interesting work involved a form of cultural dance fusion.

"It's a Sign," by Sheetal Gandhi, and "The Black Drim" (pronounced "dream") by Klenjoski, both cross-reference aspects of their creator's cultural heritage for inspiration. Gandhi freely incorporates the classical dance forms of India, while Klenjoski makes reference to the folk traditions (as well as the actual folks) that were part of her life growing up in a small country village in Macedonia.

In "It's a Sign," Gandhi (a former performer with Cirque du Soleil) fuses elements of L.A. pop culture (including moves familiar to the Laker Girls) with the stylized hand gestures of Indian dance known as "mudras." The work takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to the idea that we go through life surrounded by innocent forms of superstition -- from the simple petal-pulling prophesy of "He loves me, He loves me not," to the wishful thinking that if "the light turns green," it's a sign from above.

The movement and the text evolve as fugue-like sections with the six dancers (5 women and one man) creating patterns that multiply and intersect. Playful and inventive, it was great fun to watch.

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More dramatic in nature, "The Black Drim" depicts the amorous advances, hurtful rejections and drunken foibles of three couples who gather at the village tavern. The work, which evolves as a choreographed character study, projects a Federico Garcia Lorca-like sense of claustrophobia and hothouse passion. The emotional connections of the three couples (who represent different strata of society) are conveyed superbly through a combination of graceful fluid overtures, frenetic outbursts, tipsy awkwardness and combative athleticism. "On the Clock" by Carlos Rodriguez opened the program, with an inside-outside performance that literally had dancers climbing the lobby walls.

Sarah Swenson and her Vox Dance Theatre presented a supple piece called "Fimmine," in which a sextet of young women in wedding gowns transformed this most symbolic of fashion statements on womanhood into a mixed message of personal liberation and fabric bondage.

"Passion Plays" is a fascinating, elegantly choreographed duet by Kate Hutter (director of the LA Contemporary Dance Company) in which the push-pull of emotional connection is expressed through a series of smeared exchanges of body paint. "Figuring" danced and choreographed by Chad Hall is a solo work. Rooted in a familiar vocabulary of lunging, grasping and contortion, it convincingly conveyed the sense of a personality in conflict.

"Approach to Step Near" by Rebecca Levy and Eryn Schorn was less effective. It's a will-you, won't-you duet in which a couple attempts to explore the perimeters of their emotional/physical connection.

"A Day in the Life" by Marie Hoffman is a rambunctious piece reminiscent of Pilobolus, in which eight dancers dash about forming frantic patterns, while consistently checking their watches to see if life is running faster than they are.

The quality of the performances reflected a commitment on the part of the dancers and choreographers to the creation of emotionally insightful, visually expressive work. Too bad the community didn't show an equal level of commitment.