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DANCE ME A STORY

Wild Space spins literal and figurative tales in "Reckless Wonders."



PAUL KOSIDOWSKI — MAY 1, 2015

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📷 Mauriah Kraker. Photo by Paul Mitchell.

“Today, choreographers don’t think you can tell a story in dance,” Debra Loewen told a talkback audience after Thursday night’s Wild Space Dance Company performance, *Reckless Wonders*. She was talking, of course, about a certain kind of contemporary choreographer—those who have moved beyond traditions of 19th-century ballet, Balanchine, Martha Graham, etc.—and are interested in movement for movement’s sake.

It was an odd sentiment to share after a concert that featured a collaboration with Ex Fabula storyteller Tracy Lehrmann—a literal piece of storytelling with a sort of dance “accompaniment.” But Loewen wanted to highlight the *other* kinds of stories to be found in contemporary work like hers—moments of emotion, subtext and personal connection found in glances and gestures that don’t necessarily follow the arc of princely tragedies or romantic happy endings.

That sentiment applied to every piece on the program, but none more so than Loewen’s own *Carried Away*, a shortened, altered version of a 75-minute dance Wild Space presented in March at New York’s Roulette Performance Space. Here, a quartet of dancers (Monica Rodero, Dan Schuchart, Mauriah Kraker and Yeng Vang-Strath) performed to a recording of the largely

improvised music (played by saxophonists Tommy Davis and Nick Zoulek). As with many of Loewen's work, the work is built on the dancer's improvised ideas, and apart from a few repeated motifs, it unwinds from start to finish without a formal structure. Presented on a bare theater stage without some of Loewen's original theatrical embellishments (headlamps or hand-held lights, projected video), it's seemingly as dense and abstract as any of Loewen's recent work.

But only if you hold it at a distance, stay on the other side of the theater's fourth wall. Let your mind wander into the space with the dancers, and something remarkable happens—moments of drama and connection unfold. And, yes, stories emerge.

Watch the faces along with the movement and you'll see warmth, wry smiles, connection. "Oh, you're sweeping your left arm like that...I'll join you." Or "I'll meet you here to balance that by sliding my right foot away from center." Throughout the piece's 25 minutes, there's a kind of generous communication that is both crafted and spontaneous. Dancers slip from the space to allow others to perform solos, duets. At a few times, all are arranged in a line, and gradually, dancers step out and return in a little balancing act between the individual and the ordered collective. The music creates tension, energy, and then subsides into an easy lyricism, or even silence. And the dancers, attentive to the sound as well as the space around them, find a physical harmony or counterpoint to the notes.

There were stories in the other dances on the program as well. In Kraker's engrossing solo, *Outer Dark*, a steady synthesizer pulse establishes a relentless momentum, but the dance constantly shifts gears. In that way, it's a collection of miniature stories. One motif establishes itself—stiff, flat hands hanging low off the shoulders, flipping back and forth as she moves in a line across the stage—but then Kraker shifts direction in a way that defies expectations. Even with such divergent vocabulary, Kraker's presence—petite and lanky, dark hair angled severely across her forehead, she seems to have stepped out of a German Expressionist painting—holds everything together. The dance is unified because it comes from a single body.



Mauriah Kraker and Katie Sopoci Drake. Photo by Paul Mitchell.

Kraker also danced (with Katie Sopoci Drake) in *Clever Homini*, a piece created by Sopoci Drake and Javier Marchan Ramos. Here, the movement is taut and concentrated. It begins with Sopoci Drake on hands and feet, slowly and sinuously moving across the stage, torso flexed this way then that. From there, it erupts into precise duets. More floor work, with decisive and controlled vocabulary.

Suzanne Lappas and Stephanie Nugent danced *Katherinette* by Selene Carter (all are on the faculty at Indiana—Bloomington, and Carter is a former Wild Space member). Set to an excerpt from Handel’s cantata *Delirio Amoroso*—a sensuous, mythological equivalent to “Love the One Your With”—it’s filled with knowing glances and sexy cavorting, and reminded me of Mark Morris’s ebullient and sexy contemporary takes on Baroque music.

Monica Rodero and Dan Schuchart reprised Susan Marshall’s brilliantly evocative *Sound*, which starts with a simple idea (a muted screech that is at once playful and terrifying) and digs deep into the nature of relationships.

Ironically, the least successful piece on the program was the one with the most explicit “story.” “*And Then...*” teamed Ex Fabula performer Tracy Lehrmann with dancer Angela Frederick, who “danced” Lehrmann’s *Working Girl*-like tale about her first job at Chicago’s Mercantile Exchange. Frederick’s movement was sometimes abstract, sometimes literal. But the Ex Fabula vibe—its performances are usually casual affairs held in bars—didn’t translate well to the formal environs of the theater. The story was well told, and the dance evocative, but I preferred the danced stories that were told with movement and music alone.

Reckless Wonders repeats Friday and Saturday nights at 8 pm.

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Paul Kosidowski is a freelance writer and critic who contributes regularly to Milwaukee Magazine, WUWM Milwaukee Public Radio and national arts magazines. He writes weekly reviews and previews for the Culture Club column. He was literary director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater from 1999-2006. In 2007, he was a fellow with the NEA Theater and Musical Theater Criticism Institute at the University of Southern California. His writing has also appeared in American Theatre magazine, Backstage, The Boston Globe, Theatre Topics, and Isthmus (Madison, Wis.). He has taught theater history, arts criticism and magazine writing at Marquette University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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