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Six Degrees Dance Company

"Michael in Motion"

by Jerry Hochman

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True confession 1: I attended with considerable trepidation last night's premiere performance of "Michael in Motion" by Cecly Placenti's Six Degrees Dance Company. Ms. Placenti is a colleague/reviewer with Ballet-Dance Magazine – one of the few I've actually met. It would be an effort to be objective – and perhaps an equal effort for a reader to believe in that objectivity. True confession 2. From the company website, I found that the performance was 'an evening of dance inspired by the artwork of Michael Placenti,' and later ascertained that Michael Placenti is Ms. Placenti's late father. How could I possibly write a review of what I anticipated would be a cloying, lachrymal, semi-private homage to her dad, be honest about it, and not insult Ms. Placenti?



"Michael in Motion"

True confession 3. I should have known better.

Lovingly conceived by Ms. Placenti and her company of eclectic and committed dancers, "Michael in Motion" is no mere paterfamilias puff piece. It is a thoroughly engaging evening of dance that makes you think about the action taking place in front of you, marvel at the quality of the production, and feel a little guilty, very envious, and in the end, all warm and fuzzy.

"Michael in Motion" is 'about' the inspiration that Ms. Placenti's drew, and continues to draw, from her father and his artwork. But that's just surface. The way Ms. Placenti and her company have constructed the piece (the program notes indicate that the choreography was a collaboration between Ms. Placenti and her dancers), it is performed as, and absorbed by the audience as, dancers at an exhibition drawing inspiration and expression from pictures at an exhibition. Literally.

The piece begins before it begins (and then ends after it ends). As the audience is seated, they are invited by the company's stage manager to walk through the 'exhibition' of artwork, eleven individually easeled pieces spread in irregular rows upstage, just as if it were a gallery art exhibition. While audience members sheepishly wind their way through the stage gallery (perhaps, like me, trying to match the titles of the 'scenes' of the piece as listed in the program to the artwork), the company dancers warm up for the performance in spaces in between the

▶ artwork. One soon realizes, however (I'm a little slow), that this is not a warm-up. The dancers are costumed, the movement is choreographed, and the dancers are bodies moving in space that are 'on exhibit' as much as the paintings.

The 'formal' performance, a collection of sketches more than scenes (appropriate in the context of an 'art' exhibition) then begins. The artwork remains as originally placed, but each piece that is being 'explored' in a particular sketch is individually illuminated for that sketch. As each 'scene' progresses, the dancer(s) either begin the dance for that sketch downstage, or move downstage emerging from the artwork, as if spawned by it.



"Michael in Motion"

The initial sketch is performed to a work entitled "Ceely in Motion" – Mr. Placenti's impression of, and recognition of, his daughter's fascination with movement and dance even as a child. In many ways, "Ceely in Motion" – both the artwork and the dance – sets the mood and the style of the piece as a whole. Ms. Placenti captures and expresses in dance her father's capture and expression in visual art of his daughter's dancing. One inspires the other which inspires the other; inspiration that continues as long as there is someone to inspire. And like the style of the artwork, which is subtle and

soft-edged, befitting a father's image of a loved child, the style of the dance performed by Ms. Placenti is contemporary/balletic. That is, it's indulgently lyrical rather than angular and alienated and frenetic; accessible rather than cerebral or mechanical. And although the piece doesn't tell a story per se, it certainly has an emotional content and wears its heart on its sleeve.



If I spent the bulk of this review describing each of the eleven individual sketches (some of which morph seamlessly from one to another), it would take more time to read than the dance took to perform. So I'll summarize and provide some highlights.

The first half of "Michael in Motion" is danced to Mr. Placenti's more 'realistic' pieces: clearly recognizable forms, most in recognizable settings. I enjoyed Peter Mills's angst-riddled soliloquy to Mr. Placenti's "Jeffrey's Lament," and particularly the company's collective work inspired by a painting called "Tree." The artwork does not appear particularly meaningful to me – it's a tree; a large tree, intricately branched, but still just a tree. But to this viewer the dancers (Ms. Placenti, Rachel Russell, Kristen Klein, Alexis Silver, Arden Goll, and Wyn Ferrari) presented variations on the theme of that tree, and in the process injected more life into that tree than one could ever have anticipated by looking at the artwork.

But the highlight of the first half of "Michael in Motion" was Ms. Klein's solo illumination of Mr. Placenti's portrait of a horse in motion. Ms. Klein, a tall, highly nuanced dancer, danced not so much like she was trying to impersonate a horse, but rather to capture the wild energy, dignity, and spirit of the horse. Abetted by her costume (I'll discuss the marvelous costumes later), the performance created a very 'Native-American' image and sensibility – which Mr. Placenti may have been attempting to capture in his artwork.

The second half of the piece consisted of sketches to Mr. Placenti's abstract art. Just as Mr. Placenti's abstract artwork was freed from the limitations of realism, the choreography inspired

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by it is freed from similar restraints. And although the thrust of the choreographic style of the piece remained lyrical, the broad, enveloping port de bras and the ethereal arabesques and lifts that dominated the first half of the evening were here supplemented by inward thrusts, falls to the floor and floor-based movement, and hand gestures that seemed to change emphasis with each sketch. It was a little Taylor, a little Graham, but not either of them.

This second half opened a bit curiously. To Mr. Placenti's large abstract piece of irregular brush strokes in red, black and yellow on a white canvas, the dancers 'painted' a similar piece. Ms. Klein, with brushes taped to her hand, wrist, elbow, and knee as if they were appendages to her body, 'painted' a small canvas board with the paint-laden brushes, directed not by any inner deliberation but by the dancers who had applied the paint to the brushes and were controlling the position of the canvas in relation to Ms. Klein's 'appendages' – all in the context of the dance. This 'choreographed' painting was then placed in front of Mr. Placenti's 'actual' piece, and the similarity between the two was remarkable (identical colors; broad irregular brush-strokes). I suspect that the 'meaning' of this exercise was not so much to show that Mr. Placenti put little thought into his painting, but as a caution to the audience to 'feel', rather than try to analyze or interpret, Mr. Placenti's abstract work.

The Six Degrees dancers' ability to express and reflect the representation and the mood of Mr. Placenti's abstract art was uncanny, but the success of the performance was not only the product of the choreography and the execution. The piece is richer than that. The lighting (designed and executed by Jimmy Lawlor) was impeccable. The staging was top notch. The music was carefully created (by Jeffrey Izzo in the first half of the piece) or selected (pieces by Vitamin String Quartet, The Album Leaf, Section S, and Laurie Anderson) to reflect the expressive qualities of the artwork and the dances inspired by it. And the costumes were simply extraordinary. Created by Carole Placenti, the costumes added immeasurably to the connection between the dances and the pieces that inspired them. Every sketch, it seemed, had costume changes. Every costume not only fit the artwork, but blended with it by gently and subtly picking up on the colors of the artwork (both the dominant colors and accenting colors that were barely noticeable in the paintings). The resulting visual image for each of the sketches clarified and accented a connection between the dance and the artwork that was already there through the choreography. And where 'blending' with the artwork wasn't an issue, as in the first, realistic, half of the performance, the costumes were designed to complement each other in order to create a unified visual presentation.

The piece did not end so much as it came full circle. The last sketch, to a somewhat surreal painting of a sea of muted blue and turquoise in which one perfect realistic-looking white rose floats, is performed by the dancers in muted blue and turquoise costumes, and Ms. Russell gradually emerges as an abstract vision of the perfect white rose. The inspiration having been expressed, the sketch having ended, the dancers then retreated back to the 'stage gallery,' taking positions as bodies moving in space in between the artwork, restating the original concept of dancers at an exhibition. Perfect.

"Michael in Motion" is not without flaws. For example, as carefully crafted as it is, I would have liked more movement variety – the choreographic vocabulary is relatively limited. But given the point of the production and its intimate scope, any such flaws are far outweighed by its successes – one of which was the father/daughter relationship of mutual inspiration that Ms. Placenti allowed her audience to share, and to envy. In its simplicity, its honesty, and the evident love and care that permeate it, "Michael in Motion" honors not only Ms. Placenti's father; it honors her family, her dancers, her audience, and Ms. Placenti herself.

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