

Dancing Wheels delivers clear, messages on ADA anniversary celebration concert (review)

Updated Oct 12, 2015

Cleveland Plain Dealer

By MARK SATOLA, Special to The Plain Dealer

https://www.cleveland.com/musicdance/index.ssf/2015/10/dancing_wheels.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Modern dance tends not to be explicit in its content, but at Saturday night's concert by Cleveland's physically integrated Dancing Wheels Company, the message could not have been clearer.

The concert at the Allen Theatre marked two significant occasions -- Dancing Wheels' 35th anniversary, and the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA].

Significantly, Dancing Wheels' founding director, Mary Verdi-Fletcher, played a large role on crafting and promoting the landmark civil rights law.

The concert was as much an educational experience as an artistic one, delineating the issues faced by Americans with disabilities as they fought over the decades to gain something that many people take for granted: access to participation in the full spectrum of American life.

Five dances were premiered on the program. The opening sequence, "The Quest for Equality," linked two earlier dances, "Dancing on a Dream" by Dianne McIntyre and "Walking on Clouds" by David Rousseve, the former set to Aerosmith's "Dream On," the latter to a hip-hop inflected electronic score by Rousseve and a rhythmically recited text about acknowledging the person behind the disability ("I want you to see me").

The Cleveland premiere of Heidi Latsky's "Interlude" (2014) demonstrated the almost psychic link among members of the company as they transitioned from frozen, almost semiotic postures to flurries of contrapuntal activity and back again, all carried out in complete silence. Seated dancer Kristen Knabel glided silently among the players, who melted into the wings as Harold Arlen's hymn of aspiration, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," came up.

Isolated in a spotlight at far stage right and facing away from the audience, Knabel performed an expressive solo entirely with her arms that perfectly captured the longing expressed in the music.

An excerpt from the PBS series "Independent Lens" was screened as an introduction to Sarah Swenson's "Clamor," which reflects on the "Capitol crawl" of 1990, when disabled protesters literally crawled up the steps to the U.S. Capitol building to drive home the point that denying free access to the disabled was denying them full participation in citizenship.

To a "musique concrete" score by Alessandro Girasoli that featured enhanced and modified sounds of bells tolling and glass shattering, both seated and standing dancers pulled themselves slowly across the stage in a reenactment of the 1990 event that so dramatically urged ADA passage.



As "The Individual," Mary Verdi-Fletcher was serene and omniscient presiding over the dramatic imagery; while as "The Politico," Tony De'Berry was energetic and startling in a business suit, alternately planting himself in pompous heroic poses, leaping and high-kicking around the half-prone figures on the stage, and miming mindless chattering, all in a depiction of the bureaucratic resistance faced by advocates of the ADA.

Photo by Al Fuchs, ©DancingWheels.org

Catherine Meredith's "Incommunicado" portrayed the difficulties faced in achieving open communication among people of all abilities, with a complex and semi-abstract choreography that dazzled the eye, both in movement and in the multi-faceted lighting by Jeremy K. Benjamin, whose designs for the entire program were especially vivid and satisfying.

"Our Generation" found students from the School of Dancing Wheels performing in a classroom setting to a score that combined "Light and Motion" by Fireflies with speeches by presidents George H.W. Bush and Barack Obama, celebrating the achievements made possible by the ADA. The moving performance brought the audience to its feet, and spoke well of the future of physically integrated dance.

High spirits and comedy came to the fore in the final piece, "Going Up," by Mark Tomasic, in which an elevator ride in a tall building featured stops at various floors, such as "Inappropriate Disability Language or What Not to Say," "Disability Privilege and Disney World" and "High Heels and High Tables."

The proceedings were not all light-hearted, though. In "The Haunted Staircase," seated dancer Demarco Sleeper (a powerful and dynamic presence throughout the evening) gave shape to a young man's plight confronting a staircase in a Halloween haunted house; while Kristin Knabel endured the well-meaning but demeaning efforts of people to "help" her in "I Can Do It Myself."

Mary Verdi-Fletcher and Tony De'Berry were stunning in "Sex and Relationships," a classic pas de deux that illuminated the need for love felt by all humanity.

*