

That's entertainment: Dance troupe performs with flair

The Hubbard Street Dance Company received a well-deserved standing ovation at Memorial Hall Friday night in return for an evening of 100 percent entertainment, even if it wasn't 100 percent artistic dance.

The performance, which was composed of six pieces, incorporated many different dance styles ranging from graceful ballet to jazzy show dance to dramatic modern dance. This potpourri of styles was crucial for maintaining the audience's attention — and it was successful.

The opening piece, "And Now This," gave the spectators a taste of almost everything they would see that

Jessica Yates Dance

night. The first and last parts of the three-section piece were much like ice-skating routines, complete with fast-paced music, lots of unison dancing, plenty of lifts and "tricks," and a brilliant display of athleticism, especially on the part of the male dancers. The middle section slowed down just enough to allow the female dancers to use their body lines and extensions to the highest possible

degree.

Choreographer Margo Sappington, having worked with the Joffrey Ballet and on Broadway, knows what audiences like and what they want to see, which is what entertaining is all about. People love to see the energy of dancers, their apparent weightlessness, the incredible height of their jumps and the dizzying speed of their turns.

All of these elements could be seen in the opening piece, but what made the audience "ooh" and "aah" were the aforementioned tricks. The female dancers would run across the stage at full speed and leap into the

arms of their partners, who would catch them in spectacular poses. Again and again these and other stunts were used, a common practice in show dancing and ice-skating routines. Two female dancers also used their gymnastics experience to impress the audience.

The tricks Sappington used are not unusual these days. Many so-called jazz dance routines feature no-handed cartwheels, flips and other such feats. While they are impressive, they aren't dancing. The same can be said for the use of partner lifts and catches. They are effective and thrilling to a certain point, but they

can become repetitive and predictable after a while. A balance is always needed between these stunts and dance.

The opening contained a few too many of these tricks to be considered a well-balanced dance, but the dancing that was in it was excellent. The moves were well executed, and the piece tapped the versatility and talent of all the dancers. It left the audience in suspense and excited about the rest of the show.

The next work, "Go! Said Max," was a contemporary pas de deux and used deep, serious music, but the choreography was unpredictable

animated. It made some very interesting uses of the body lines of the dancers and even had some role-switching in the choreography (the female dancer actually lifted the male). There was still an element of ice-show type dancing — especially since the woman, Kitty Skillman Hilsabeck, used to compete on an international level in gymnastics — but there were enough dynamics and stylistic effects to create a light, but not fluffy, performance of the dance.

Both "Go! Said Max" and the next piece, "Appearances," were choreographed by "Footloose" choreographer Lynne Taylor-Corbett. "Appearances," however, is the work that best showed her ability, and it was one of the numbers marked by more true dancing.

Three couples dancing in high-class ballroom-style costumes may sound a bit bland, but the easily recognizable theme of trying to appeal to the opposite sex is what set the humorous, yet romantic, tone for the dance. The unison dancing was exceptional, a necessary achievement in such a piece. There were just enough partner lifts to have a nice effect, but not enough to spoil the slyness and humor of watching the men try to preserve their "G.Q." image while the women provocatively strolled around the stage. It was definitely one of the most enjoyable pieces in the performance.

The next work was by far the most serious and the most modern of the dances presented. "The Kitchen Table," choreographed by Bill Cratty, might even be considered as a drama using dance as a tool rather than a true dance.

A story about a daughter growing up, the piece humorously exaggerated the roles of the parents in the family and showed the possibility of how "perfect love" can turn into something quite imperfect. A structure on stage was used creatively as a crib, a kitchen table and something resembling a boxing ring. Most of the piece was simply pantomime and acting, though at one point the daughter and her lover had a dance. The "like mother, like daughter" moral was a bit depressing too, but the work as a whole was imaginative and memorable.

"Decisions, Decisions, Decisions," a jazz number featuring three men, made superb use of the lights to create the illusion of each male dancing in an enclosed area. This piece was 100 percent dance. Choreographer Richard Levi, who teaches his own style of jazz, used floor space and varying levels better than any of the other choreographers featured.

Even with a rather small amount of room for jumping, the dancers performed exceptionally well. There was very little interaction between the three, but the dynamic energy of each dancing in his own area and the emotion of the piece were powerful.

The finale, "The '40s," is the traditional final number for the Hubbard Street Dance Company, and the reasons are evident. It was lively and fun, and although it was not as technical as the previous dances, it was entertaining — and "entertaining" is the key word.

Artistic director Lou Conte, who has choreographed more than 30 musicals, clearly has been influenced by his years on Broadway. "The '40s" was definitely a show dancing piece, much like tap dancing without the taps. It contained some partnering feats, but the amount was appropriate for the piece. It, too, was an audience favorite.

More importantly, the audience felt they knew everyone up on that stage really wanted to be there, and they really wanted to show the world what fun dancing can be. The Hubbard Street Dance Company took a step back from traditional dance as an art, but it took a step closer to dance as entertainment. No one should really be surprised though, because entertaining is what this particular company is all about.

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