

# Danceworks Performance MKE is ‘Boundless’

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 11/3/2023

Danceworks Performance MKE opened its season last weekend with *Boundless*, a joyful concert of 15 dances in jazz and swing styles. The show was the brainchild of artistic director Christal Wagner, its chief choreographer.

“It’s important,” Wagner said in her welcoming speech, “to celebrate all types of dance.” She told us her childhood dance training had been in tap, kick lines, cancan and Irish dance, then on to every sort of ballroom style. In college, it was jazz, swing, shimmy and “vernacular stepping patterns” like the Charleston and the Shorty George. These forms were the foundation of her dance career, she said, but she’d never been taught their history.

From lindy hop to hip hop, many of America’s popular dance styles are rooted in the dances of slaves. As Wagner writes in her program notes, “these steps emerged from African dance practices brought to the United States by enslaved peoples who were ripped from their culture, banned from drumming, and dance was their only way to express and communicate with each other across tribes and plantations.”

She closes her note with a promise. “I will do whatever it takes to continue to educate dancers, audiences, and supporters, giving credit where credit is due.” For a jazz lover like me with similar childhood dance training, *Boundless* fulfilled that promise on a light note. In a nutshell, it was great fun.

## Human Possibility

I was haunted by the title *Boundless* until I remembered that jazz is anything but strict. The technical mastery required is unbounded. So is the freedom to individualize. There’s always a relation to a beat, but it’s endlessly flexible. Jazz is only bound by human possibility.

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“Jazz is a Spirit” was the title of the opening number, set to a catchy tune by that title by Jakob Manz, Mark Harrington, and Paulo Fresu. In dim light in the cozy Danceworks Studio, a dozen interesting dancers moved or posed to the beat, sometimes in choreographed unison but always personal. Suddenly, the light brightened, and Wagner weaved her way into the mix in fast, powerful, full-bodied moves. Already, it was hard to sit still. I wanted to join in somehow.

A filmed interview by Wagner with African and jazz dance artist Paté Patrice Nassalang followed. This was a directly educational segment of the show. Intercut with clips of jitterbugs, foxtrots, and swing dancing in places like the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, or in movies like *West Side Story*, Nassalang outlined the history of jazz dance from turn of the century Charleston through 1950s rock and roll.

Then back to the Danceworks Company live, dancing to Art Pepper’s *Opus de Funk* with choreography by Wagner. High energy, claps, stomps, shaking shoulders, big grins, and lots of fast-paced and complex changes, it was all we’d just heard about crammed into one little, living-room-like theatre.

## Cool Swing

Next, we were treated to an un-choreographed lindy hop performed by BJ Szyjakowski and Lyndsey Kuhlmann from Cream City Swing. Improvised in social dance style to a cool swing version of *Pennies from Heaven*, it looked just like you'd find in a club on a lucky night in 1959.

I was 11 years old then and loving these songs of my parent's generation. When I hit middle-age, I was singing this stuff with my band. *Boundless* kept bringing my whole life to mind. I couldn't resist it.

A dozen numbers followed, each a delight. Sometimes they'd come in series, one to the next. Gabi Sustache—dancer, choreographer, teacher of many styles including hip hop, and always outstanding—choreographed the next piece, *Precision*. It was named for the tune by Logic 1000 that accompanied it, but that title describes its demands. Zoe Glise, Tessa Ritchey, Isaac Robertson and Sustache herself precisely nailed the ever-changing, endlessly creative movements involving every legal body part, each dancer tied to the driving beat but rarely moving in unison. It was clearly a ball.

Then Wagner's *Unsquare Dance* for Katelyn Altmann, Kaitlyn Moore, and Greta Jenkins catalogued how well-trained bodies respond to rhythm. Wagner also created striking solos for Altmann (private, revealing), Moore (fierce, bluesy), and Elisabeth Roskopf (lyrical, elegant).

The invaluable Cuauhtli Ramirez Castro was a powerhouse in several Wagner numbers. He and Robertson portrayed queer lovers in *Birds of a Feather*, a tender, sexy piece by Wagner, with Ritchey and Halle Silvertson as allies. He was also featured in Wagner's *First Song*, a blues-driven tale of grief, hope, desire, and romance with Altmann, Moore, Ritchey, Jessica Lueck, and Ashley Ray Garcia. Garcia, always a compelling presence, was also excellent with Sustache and Lueck in the Wagner's spiritual *Otherly*.

Gina Laurenzi choreographed the funny, fast-paced, lovable *Quirky But Cool* for Jenkins, Robertson, Sivertson, Sustache, and Glise. So cool! I sat back, laughed, and loved it. The whole concert was medicinal. My enjoyment was boundless.

### [John Schneider](#)

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