

Gina Laurenzi's 'Biome' is a Powerful Dance about Ocean Life

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 3/5/2024

Danceworks Performance MKE, the professional contemporary dance company of the multifaceted Danceworks organization, presented choreographer/dancer/company member Gina Laurenzi's *Biome* last weekend as the second major offering of the season. With music by Allen Russell, lighting by Colin Gawronski, set and costume designs by Laurenzi and company artistic director Christal Wagner, Herculean work by 13 dancers including Laurenzi, and a bit of important audience participation, it was quite the event.

I'll describe what I can but in all honesty you had to be there. I can point to the influence of several other Milwaukee companies that Laurenzi works with; in particular, Wild Space Dance Company and Hyperlocal. Those companies make powerful creative use of actual non-theater environments. Laurenzi is a devoted scuba diver. *Biome* takes place in the ocean's depths. Laurenzi's subject is the beauty and destruction of life there. Since we couldn't gather underwater, she created it in dance and had us dive in.

There was grandeur to it. The choreography suggested divers and animals but never imitated them. No touch of Disney. The dancers committed their limberness, strength, balance, stamina and memorization skills to the execution of challenging movements. They danced hard. They formed communities. It was for us to imagine them as ocean animals of all sorts; or as animal souls.

A lot of dancing happened on the floor. Standing movements often featured powerful arm and leg work, sometimes with splayed toes and fingers. Faces were marked with colored glitter. Bits of fin-like netting were fastened to costumes at odd spots. The dominant colors of costumes and lighting were blue and green with touches of purple, yellow and pink.

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Underwater World

Upon arrival at the Danceworks box office, we were invited by Wagner to join a line of audience members in a hallway faced away from the theater's entrance. At the front of that line, Laurenzi invited small groups of viewers to enter a dance studio with its standard wall-size mirror, but radically transformed into an underwater world. This was the start of our dive. We were free to wander, guided by paths shaped by underwater flora (vast drapes of green paper loops and some flowers), rock formations (white cloth-covered objects), and fauna (improvising soloists, each unique, on the floor or hiding in a cave, or floating free, or curious to encounter us in the ever-undulating watery light.) In a darkened corner, Russell played his violin impulsively; I'll call the music spiritual since we were in a kind of sanctuary.

My group of nine made its way individually. The pathway led to a pile of trash beside the actual theater's entrance. There, human creatures asked us each to grab a piece of non-recyclable plastic garbage attached with plastic tape to a sheet of plastic wrap, and to take it to our seat. As the main performance was about to start, Laurenzi asked us in a voice-over to store the trash beneath our chairs. We'd learn what to do with it later, she said. I'd guess that everyone felt a sense of foreboding.

Indeed, as *Biome* arrived at its last movement, Wagner led the entire audience in the act of tossing our trash onto a rolled up blue tarp on the stage floor in front of the seating. Unrolled, it covered the floor of the sea world that had mesmerized us for more than an hour. The creatures we'd met—brought to life in virtuosic dancing—would perish at our hands. The ugly final image of *Biome* was of dead bodies and plastic tangled in black netting.

We'd been cast as ourselves. In tossing our plastic, we've damaged our planet badly. What might it mean to enact that now in an artwork? Had we become activists?

Aside from the compelling choreography, exquisite dancing, and dreamlike yet credibly underwater lighting, it was Russell's compositions—a combination of soaring violin melodies, complex electronic accompaniment created live and pre-recorded, mixtures of rhythms and the sounds of soaring, or roaring, or shrieking waves—that made *Biome* so moving for me. The sound was orchestral, and as crucial to the show's impact as Tchaikovsky's score is to *The Nutcracker*.

The main performance unfolded in 12 scenes. The program listed titles like "Swirling By," "Living Fossils," "Nine Brains & 3 Hearts," "Exoskeletons & jointed appendages" and finally "14 million tons." It was hard to tell the endings and beginnings, but that didn't matter. The show flowed.

Every dancer was important. Laurenzi was careful to draw our focus to each of them. They were Katelyn Altmann, Greta Jenkins, Jessica Lueck, Kaitlyn Moore, Cuauhtli Ramirez Castro, Ashley Ray Garcia, Isaac/Ivy Robertson, Elisabeth Roskopf, Halle Sivertson, Gabi Sustache, Zoe Glise and Jamie Riddle.

The opening night audience cheered and cheered at the curtain call. I hope there's a future for *Biome*. The work deserves revival. We can all grow.

[John Schneider](#)

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