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## Connecting dis/connect at Danceworks

John Schneider : 5-7 minutes : 11/11/2024

“When will we notice we tune into the phone more than each other, and the world around us?” Gina Laurenzi wrote in the program notes for *dis/connect*, her new dance concert with Danceworks Performance MKE that premiered last weekend. “When occupied by happenings online, and entranced by apps and social media, we miss out on these awe-filled experiences that happen in real time and we risk missing out on moments of connection. Are we able to experience awe with our heads in our phones?”

It’s a good question. I know from her own lips that she’s made it a personal goal to put her phone aside and focus on what’s happening around her and inside her. She said that doing so has rekindled her creative drive. And that’s what this show was about.

*dis/connect* is Laurenzi’s third full-length dance for the professional Danceworks company in recent years, but her first as co-artistic director with Christal Wagner, a role she welcomed after graduating with an MFA in Dance from UWM last spring.

### Power of Wonder

The research for her MFA thesis took her to Monica C. Parker’s book *The Power of Wonder* and to the work of psychologist Dacher Keltner on the value of awe and the importance of seeking experiences that inspire it. She created *dis/connect* with the cast of eleven, and played a role in it herself, aiming colorful images onto the performers with a slide projector placed at the edge of the floor near the audience’s feet.

Our phones are certainly a major fact of life. For the record, I hate mine. I carry it in case of emergency. I open it to check the time, or to delete as fast as possible the ever-present unrequested text messages, mostly asking for money. I never answer calls from the many numbers I don’t recognize. I worry I’ll fall victim to a scam. I never take photos. The only app I use is the one that controls the volume of my hearing aids.

There was no comparable revulsion in Laurenzi’s piece. The story—if I can use that word for a dance that’s basically abstract—is of dancers individually turning their attention from their phones to each other and to their environment. Working in partners, teams, or groups, they transform the playing space into an actual play land with hints of nature’s beauty.

### Full-Bodied Dancing

Laurenzi’s choreography was a mix of ordinary movements—lying or sitting on the floor in various positions, sometimes with a phone in hand, sometimes resting, or executing set-change tasks like stagehands might—and skilled, energetic, full-bodied dancing, whether draped in electrical cables or erupting as if seized by powerful impulses, ideas or feelings.

All of it was beautifully supported, lifted and carried by the warm musical “soundscapes” created live by Chicago artists Dustin Laurenzi on sax and electronics, and Jeff Swanson on guitar and electronics. The variety and depth was amazing.

For me, the most interesting feature of *dis/connect* was its form. The entire 35-minute dance with its musical accompaniment and lighting shifts was performed twice. Upon arrival at the theater, audience members were sent down the main hallway to either Studio A or Studio B. By show time, a similar number of curious viewers were seated facing the dance floor of their respective studio.

## Crossing Unseen

But those dance floors are directly connected by a back hallway. The dancers could easily leave the dance floor of one studio, cross unseen, and make an entrance onto the other. Or they could use the aisles and take the main hallway to the other studio. That come-and-go was almost constant.

Thus, during the performance’s first run-through, each audience member saw whatever happened in the studio they’d been assigned to. Then both audiences switched studios. During the second performance, everyone saw what had gone on beyond their view-slash-screen. Each person made whatever sense of it.

I began in Studio B. I remembered the gist of what I’d seen there as my attention focused on the action in Studio A. There were traces in Studio A of a Studio B action highlight when countless brightly colored plastic balls were poured across the dance floor. I’d joined in the fun by kicking the balls that rolled up to my feet, as if in a game. Other audience members picked them up and tossed them back onstage. I vividly remembered the many potted plants the dancers lovingly displayed in Studio B, and the small hangings they’d attached to the back wall like tentative artworks. Studio B had become a community playroom.

Studio A developed as a place for human interconnection. I remember best the dancers’ warm smiles as they moved in unison or partnered one another—their phones abandoned—or created a path of colored stones toward what was going on next door.

## John Schneider

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