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2017 in review: a year of expanding boundaries in dance

By Claudia Bauer
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Photo: RJ Muna

In the Ethnic Dance Festival's Opera House debut, Awakko Ren does a traditional Japanese dance.

Dance in San Francisco delivered an embarrassment of riches this season. Hardly a weekend passed without multiple performances, often at overlapping times, in a diverse spectrum from classical ballet to immersive postmodernism. What was most striking about this season was how many artists, both mainstream and independent, took creative risks, presented dance in unexpected ways and used performance as a tool of rebellion.

San Francisco Ballet's "Salome": You wouldn't expect the year's most polarizing performance to come from San Francisco Ballet, but there it was: Arthur Pita's "Salome," the centerpiece of Program 5. The midcentury-mobster retelling had Herod and Herodias rolling onstage in a stretch limo, a doped-up Salome (Dores André, in a fully committed performance) passionately kissing John the Baptist's bloody severed head, and cannons spewing metallic confetti. Pita has been called "the David Lynch of dance" for his unpredictable, sometimes disturbing choreography, and that's why "Salome" is significant: It thrilled some viewers, perplexed others and offended more than a few, and Artistic Director Helgi Tomasson went with it. Tomasson is taking chances again with next season's Unbound: A Festival of New Works, which brings 12 new commissions, including another one from Pita. Bravo.

Changing of the guard: Along with fresh ideas onstage, S.F. Ballet boasted freshness in its ranks. The star dancers who retired over the past two years will be missed: Joan Boada, Lorena Feijoo, Pascal Molat, Gennadi Nedvigina, Davit Karapetyan and Vanessa Zahorian make up an incomplete list. Yet the expansive room they left at the top is being filled by new company members like principal Ana Sophia Scheller, who joined from New York City Ballet, and Ulrik Birkkjær from the Royal Danish Ballet. More importantly, young, homegrown dancers are also on the rise, from recently promoted soloists like Esteban Hernandez and Jahna Frantziskonis to corps members like Lonnie Weeks who are getting well-deserved opportunities.

Location, location, location: Site-specific dance popped up all over. Kim Epifano’s “Trolley Dances” made its 14th annual Muni trip across San Francisco, with artists performing at seven stops on the N-Judah line. In “Fugue,” Detour Dance excavated LGBTQ history on a walking tour in the Mission, while Rashad Pridgen reflected on police brutality in the Black Lives Masquerade in the Bayview neighborhood. And for its 43rd season, Margaret Jenkins Dance Company created two outstanding works based on place, performed at the Wilsey Center for Opera: The intimate, abstract drama “Site Series (Inside Outside)” was originally performed in living rooms, a refugee center and an ambassador’s residence in Sweden, and “Skies Calling Skies Falling” seemed to soar inside the Taube Atrium Theater’s oblong, non-winged space.

Axis Dance Company’s 30th anniversary season: Oakland’s physically integrated dance company entered its fourth decade and a new era, presenting a home season that was its strongest in recent memory. In Amy Seiwert’s “The Reflective Surface” and “Radical Impact” by new Artistic Director Marc Brew, set to a commissioned score by the hip-hop/classical Ensemble Mik Nawooj, Axis looked fearless and contemporary, and inventive and reinvigorated. The pioneering work of co-founder Judith Smith put Axis on the map and paved the way for other companies that combine disabled and non disabled dancers; as she prepares to retire, Axis is still breaking artistic ground.

Joffrey Ballet residency at Cal Performances: The Chicago company and the Berkeley presenter pooled their resources and offered the Bay Area a generous gift in November: a weeklong immersion in the life of a dance company. At company-led community ballet classes, open studios with choreographer Nicolas Blanc and dancers Victoria Jaiani and Fabrice Calmels, and a public forum — all either free or at low cost — anyone could be in the rooms where ballet happens. The culminating performances at Zellerbach Hall were almost beside the point. If you missed out, don’t worry; there will be at least two more installments during the five-year residency.

Fact/SF’s “Platform”: Epic productions come in all sizes, from the biggest ballets to intimate works like “Platform,” a postmodern duet that could be measured in microns of astonishing detail. Created by Fact/SF Artistic Director Charles Slender-White and dancer Liane Burns over a two-year process, and presented in a cube-like installation at ODC’s Walking Distance Dance Festival, “Platform” featured intricate, meticulously timed twinning that was in turn timed to a video montage of those same movements performed in a dozen locations. The turn of Slender-White’s head or the flick of Burns’ hand drew intense scrutiny, and the mind reeled at artists who would devote themselves to creating so minute a masterwork.

S.F. Ethnic Dance Festival: It’s been world-famous for decades, but it took 39 years for the festival to reach San Francisco’s biggest stage. For two weekends in July, the War Memorial Opera House showcased the cultures of Brazil, Iran, Mongolia, Hawaii and beyond, and artists like Bitezo Bia Kongo, tabla master Zakir Hussain and flamenca La Tania performed with passion and pride for capacity audiences. It was a triumph for inclusion and a joyful celebration, and the response was seismic — the theater reverberated with cheers and applause. When the festival returns for its 40th anniversary, even those 3,000 seats might not be enough.

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