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Harvest Festival's Second Weekend Full of Unresolved Cliffhangers



Valerie Alpert Dance Company. Photo by John A. Ferrante

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Sep 30, 2018 | By Lauren Warnecke

As Nicole Gifford and Melissa Mallinson came onstage for their usual curtain speech, Post-Its in hand, a gaggle of people in pedestrian clothing started trailing white raffia streamers from the waistband of Amalia Rivera's shorts. It's the set up for Jacksonville Dance Theatre's "The Things they Carried," the opening dance of Harvest Chicago Contemporary Dance Festival's final lineup (whose first weekend, by the way, was scattered with [little morsels of goodness](http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/dance/ct-ent-harvest-fest-dance-review-0924-story.html) (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/dance/ct-ent-harvest-fest-dance-review-0924-story.html>)).

I find this to usually be the case about Harvest - there are surprises, often good surprises, but nothing so wholly radical to throw the audience into a tizzy. The program tone is generally subdued, but can be quite thought provoking, profound even.

This was particularly true in the evening's second half, with an excerpt of James Morrow's solo called "I" and a duet for Erin Kilmurray and Mikey Rioux choreographed by Kate Corby of Madison, WI. The pairing of Kilmurray and Rioux together has always felt organic and natural - made more special, perhaps, by Rioux's return to Chicago, a city he once called home. The work, titled "Passing," starts on the floor, and remains there for quite a while, the two simultaneously tossing and turning about themselves in near perfect unison, often returning to a side-by-side sprawl on their bellies. They come together and spoon for a long pause, before

rising to their feet for what might be described as a squabble between partners, or a beautiful boxing match which ends in a draw. "Passing" defies its title by seeming to exist in a sort of purgatory. The dancers come at each other again and again, each time with a different strategy, but it always yields the same result. And so the lights abruptly, appropriately, cut to black, offering us no moral of the story or resolution to this divine comedy.



James Morrow

Morrow adds a bit of an ellipse to the end of "///," too. He blends breakdancing with references to Christianity through a recorded recitation of the Lord's Prayer (by Michael Wall), and gestures inspired by those performed in a Catholic mass. This performance, for me, brings up memories of Morrow's [2015 Harvest Festival performance](http://www.artintercepts.org/2015/09/21/at-the-harvest-fest-less-is-more-review/) (<http://www.artintercepts.org/2015/09/21/at-the-harvest-fest-less-is-more-review/>), a solo he dedicated to the late dancer/choreographer Paul Christiano, although this is clearly more directed at his own internal battles. In the final moments, Morrow repeats a common breakdancing move, dipping one knee to the floor as a foot extends to the side, then bouncing up and doing it again and again, until the

music fades out and all we hear is exhausted, heavy breathing. Depending on the nature of your own personal narrative, you could easily picture the scene as the "last call," when you're on a near empty dance floor, music thumping just for you, until "you don't gotta go home, but you can't stay here." Or, "///" might bring up countless Sundays of practiced genuflects, or innate crossings of the forehead, lips, and chest. For Morrow it's clearly both; either way, "///" seems to be about the near abandonment of consciousness that comes with any embodied cultural ritual.

Completing the second act were MitchellMovement & Dancers' "Out of Pocket," a satirical dance about four men in a rat race who literally eat cash, spraying money all over the stage, only to pick it up again, and Aerial Dance Chicago in an excerpt from their [most recent full-length, "Blackbird."](http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/dance/ct-ott-aerial-blackbird-dance-card-0713-story.html) (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/dance/ct-ott-aerial-blackbird-dance-card-0713-story.html>)

In the first half, Valerie Alpert presented "Sum of its Parts," a somewhat apathetic quartet in steel gray tank tops and shorts. The movement is boisterous and balletic at points, calling on the dancers' classical technique in phrases akin to a petit allegro. But the feeling is mostly a blend of jazz and contemporary dance, without a hint of punch or pizzazz – thankfully – an aesthetic those familiar with Alpert's work will recognize and enjoy. Hailing from New York, Aaron McGloin brought a trio, "Trade," apparently about an amorphous relationship between three men. Are they involved in a love triangle, a tumultuous friend circle, a family in peril? It's hard to tell, really. It's inchoate, perhaps, but "Trade" develops an interesting dynamic as a duet becomes a trio, and a trio becomes a solo.



Aaron McGloin Dance

Which brings me back to Amalia Rivera and those streamers extended from her shorts. Her solo and one other, danced by hip-hop sprite Kristi Licera in an uncharacteristic lyrical work set to a jazz score by Steven T Gordon, offer the most resolution of the night, while most of the others yield more questions than answers. These are very different solos by two very different women, but each performs with a level of compelling dynamism that are, at once, fragile, strong, and vulnerable. As Rivera moved within the confines her colleagues had put her in, her turns

and twists pulled at the streamers, which were affixed to the ground like a huge white hoop skirt, to the point of breaking. By the end, she had scooped up the wreckage, as if the collective memory of this flexible bondage only served to make her stronger.

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