

REVIEW: S.J. Ewing & Dancers at Dance Place

Review: *Analog* by S. J. Ewing & Dancers

by Taryn Packheiser Brown

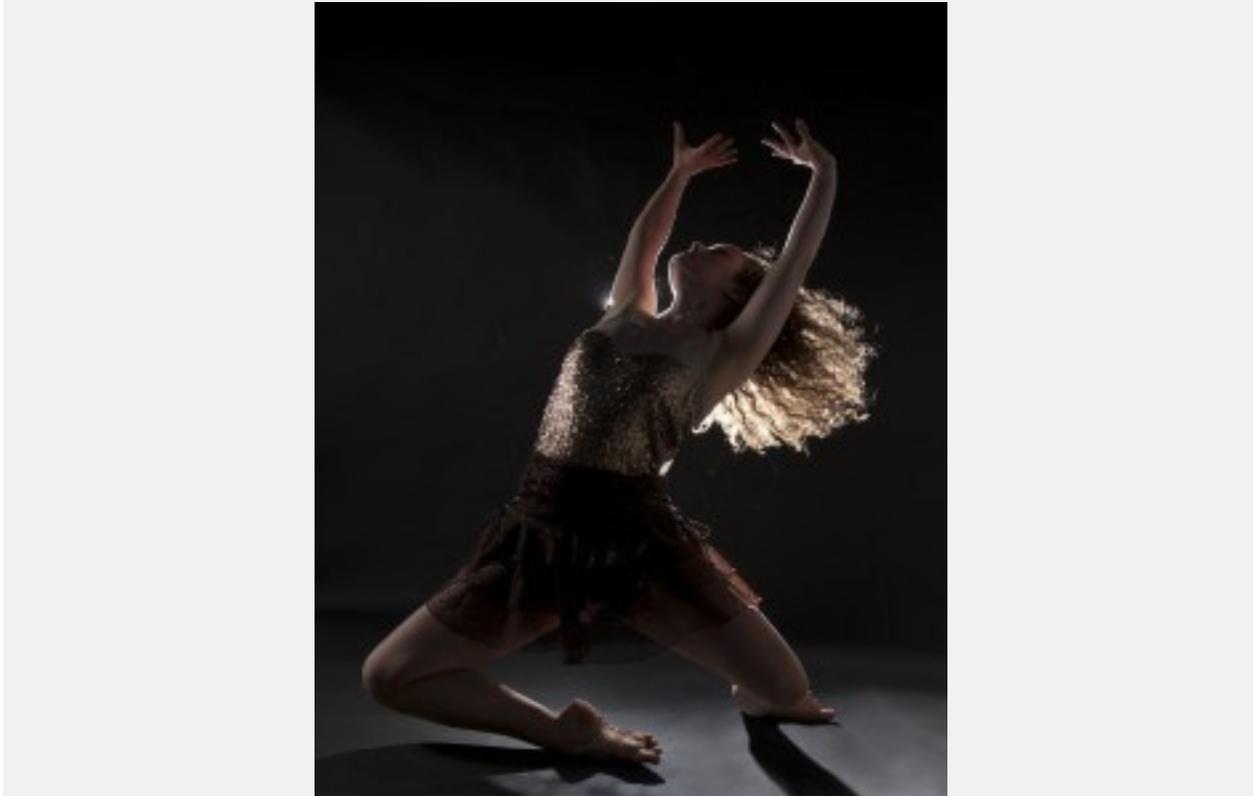


Photo by Maggie Picard

In an enchanting display of technical virtuosity performed within an environment of projected lines, circles, grids, and static, S.J. Ewing & Dancers both dazzled and inspired the audience. The company premiered their piece entitled *Analog* at Dance Place this past weekend. With choreography by Sarah J. Ewing (with the artists) and intertwined projection designed by Jonathan Hsu, the nearly one hour dance piece illuminated contrasting concepts of permanence/transience, recorded design/living art, and mechanical/organic structure. The piece was danced by four powerful women with varying ethnicities, movement styles, and yet, a striking coexistence of dynamics and technical range. It's a wonder that such cerebral inspiration and output could also include moments of perceived emotional depth and empathy within a staged environment.

Analog opened in stillness. It was riveting, really. The slow and methodical accumulation that followed was mesmerizing and turned out to be one of the strongest sections of the entire dance. From the opening we travelled from various sections, which highlighted solos, duets, trios, and periods where all of the dancers were on stage together. Movement patterns emerged that highlighted the push and pull between flexion and extension, various rond de jambe actions of the legs, and an almost perpetual up and down relationship with the floor. Other highlighted movements used frequently were a battement derriere envelope, handstand with a side leg extension, and differently initiated body rolls. From inversions to undulations, the vocabulary of movement evidenced training and challenges of which no layman should attempt. Although visually and kinesthetically stimulating, the movements and phrases seemed to remain at a similar pacing

throughout the entire show. There was implied rhythm and musicality in the phrasing, but there never seemed to be an emphasis on slowing down or speeding up.

Among the collection of virtuosic solos highlighted in the piece, the one that stood out most was Briana Ashley Stuart's emotionally isolating section, which used a follow-spot type trick with the top lights. Stuart maintained such composure that it felt that she was hopeful and alone in a struggle against something greater than what an individual can endure, or perhaps understand. The other solos featured Grace Cho's balletic extensions and showmanship, Kyoko Ruch's meditative ferocity, and Ewing's internalized qualities. Each solo had its own individual characteristics within an overall unifying aesthetic of monochromatic background design.

The most striking use of two dancers was in a section performed by Cho and Ruch in which the footlights created shadows behind the live action. The movements were captivating by themselves, but the addition of the shadows created intrigue within the relationship of this 2D and 3D performance. This successfully captured the title and essence of the show. They literally created an analog of themselves before our very own eyes. As well, it was as if they simultaneously created a memory of something during the actual event. This made me think of digital pictures, blogging, and live video posting on social media. This section captured a portion of Ewing's director letter in which she stated that she wanted choreography and code to "exist in one space, in one moment."

Analog was a testament to the process of taking everyday life and putting it into a singular artwork. Instead of bringing pedestrian, simplified movement into the theater in order to speak of greater ubiquitous complexities, Ewing decided to bring the everyday office-space world into an arts piece and show us how fascinating computer code can be when paired with contemporary dance movement invention. The serious approach to the work, the diligence and drive in the performances, and the execution of the technical aspects were stellar. As this was the premiere, there seemed to be room for making the work even stronger. I feel that each section can develop even further, thus making the transitions more organic and seamless. I would also encourage a comb through of the music in that it became fairly monotonous, if not just too familiar over time.

S.J. Ewing & Dancers is clearly a group with great promise and panache. The professionalism and artistry evidenced in the 2016 *Analog* premiere were of top caliber. I can't wait to see what they make next.