

REVIEW: “What’s Going On? Life, Love, and Social Justice” at Dance Place

What’s Going On? Life, Love, and Social Justice
Dance Place
November 12 – 20
By Kacie Peterson

What’s Going On? Life, Love, and Social Justice opened at Dance Place Saturday, Nov. 12, and it could not have come at a more appropriate time in our nation’s history. *What’s Going On?* is produced and presented by Dance Place.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and in this instance, it took a village to bring to life the vision of Producer Richard Pilkinton and Artistic Director/Co-choreographer Vincent E. Thomas. Co-choreographers Ralph Glenmore and Sylvia Soumah were brought in to complement the artistic vision of Thomas. Sarah Kramer and Dance Place are additional producers for the show – the first of its kind to be held at Dance Place. A cast of 13 performers was joined by eight members of Dance Place’s Repertory Class.

The evening began with an optional pre-show. The theater doors opened, and dancers in white flooded into Dance Place’s lobby to mingle. While it might be tempting to go find your seat, get comfortable, and mentally prepare yourself for the curtain to open – don’t!

Since I didn’t have a chance to warn my fellow audience members this time, about half of them had made their way into the theater. The rest of us were invited to play as contestants in the “Marvin Gaye Trivia Game Show.” Half of the lobby was divided into Team This and half into Team That. Our team captains were dancers in the production. We were given 15 seconds to gather as a group and produce our answers. I’d tell you the questions, but no one likes a cheater, so you’re on your own! Then, it was time for the performance to officially begin. The remaining unseated audience members were filed into the theater to the vocals of African spirituals sung by the dancers. It had only been 15 minutes, and I knew this was exactly where I needed to spend my Saturday night.

If your typical pre-show ritual is anything like mine, you generally find yourself looking through the program to see the line-up of pieces, choreographers, and dancers. When I paged through mine and found nothing but a simple “Act I; Social Interlude; Act II,” admittedly, I panicked a little. *How would I know what was coming next?* Trust me, it’s okay. Just sit back and let the performance happen and unfold as it was intended. It’s much better that way.

As the last audience members found their seats, the performers continued their African dance (a beautiful choreographic contribution by Soumah). Both the control and freedom of African dance were vibrantly on display as dancers took to the center of the circle, cheered on by the thrills and yelps of their fellow cast members. The motif of community was developed here and continued to be recurring concept in the show.

The large group of dancers cleared, leaving Vincent E. Thomas in circular projection of light that mirrors a ripple. A blue sky with clouds covered the back wall as a man sang the Lord’s Prayer. I didn’t immediately recognize the prayer, having only spoken the words and never heard it in song form. Many people get their peace from a higher power, so it seemed an appropriate place to begin. Quotes from Marvin Gaye (and others) are projected on the back wall throughout the performance. Each quote is a hint at what will be performed next. We learn that music began impacting Marvin’s life when he was a child and that it pulled his community together.

This is when the projections begin to transport us from audience members in a theater to flies on the wall of a living room in the 1970s. There are several tangible props to further set the scene, but for the most part, the lighting and projections are the determining factor creating the environment. The majority of the movement in Act I is simple. It's comprised of social and hand dancing, basic jazz dance movement, and funk dance tributes. I watched the cast do movements you'd find in any basic jazz class: chassés, ball changes, pirouettes, fan kicks, and pencil turns. The choreography vocabulary was not difficult. Could I have joined them on stage? Yes. Could I have made it look as effortless as the cast did? Definitely not. These performers were whittled down from an audition of 100 dancers back in July and September of 2015. The right calls were made. Not only do these performers have clean lines and impeccable technique, they inject their personalities and emotion into each and every step.

What caught my eye though were the wrist rolls and the popping and locking of 1970s funk dance. These movements are authentic to the time period of the piece, and they added a distinct layer of credibility for the artists and performers.

You must watch for the first duet that breaks out of the living room scene. As previously stated, the cast is technically superb. The connection between this male and female pair is believable. While their duet is punctuated with lifts, it's not overdone. Both partners are equal in effort and movement quality – neither is dominant over the other, which is refreshing to see.

Thomas's comedic and light-hearted choreography is offset by short pieces that reflect the tone put forth from Marvin Gaye's quotes projected on the backwall. *My Funny Valentine*, in particular, is danced by a woman who just wants to find someone to love her for her. The anxiety of looking for love plays out in both the tremors she stifles and the emotion on her face. Her sharp moments of angles and floorwork contradict the duet before her. While the change might seem abrupt, I found it satisfying. Not everything in life or love is easily celebrated and the dance should reflect that. Classics *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*, *Let's Get It On*, *My Funny Valentine*, and *Mona Lisa* played throughout the work. Act I was predominantly a large dance party, and I wanted so desperately to join in on the Soul Train!

There were a few obvious timing flaws, but nothing I couldn't chalk up as opening night jitters. With two full weekends of performances, and a recently added Thursday, November 17th performance, the dancers have plenty of time to continue to wow audience members.

Intermission was renamed as a "Social Interlude," where we were handed mini-hand fans with two questions: 'What are the concerns for your community?' and 'What are the celebrations for your community?' The discussion surrounding these questions would continue at the end of the show. To start Act II, the curtain opens and the dancers each pick up a blank protestor sign. There is an immediate difference in the tone of Act II. The dancers are dressed in neutrals of olive green and brown.

In a clever use of projection, Thomas walks in front of the line of dancers, casting a different black and white photo on each sign. The photos are infamous images of protests throughout our country's history. As Thomas moves to the next dancer and the next image, the relieved dancer makes their way to the upstage right corner. A group has formed – their blank signs held high.

During Thomas's solo, he points back to the crowd, and in doing so, the blank signs are flipped to reveal their messages: Justice, Just Us. Lives Matter. Truth, Love, Peace. Accountability. Occupy. These messages ring home because we see them daily on the news.

With the signs discarded, the dancers begin a phrase that mimics the one Thomas started, to a visual recording of Marvin Gaye singing the National Anthem. If you've ever seen Marvin Gaye sing

the National Anthem, you know it doesn't sound like the traditional version. Thomas begins with a salute and throws in a raised fist, reminiscent of the Black Power salute during the 1968 Olympics. The dancers, still facing upstage, make the phrase their own by adjusting quality, timing and effort at their own time. We see several dancers tremble through the salute, perhaps grappling with what's going on in America these days?

Thomas's choreography is physical with a side of cool. His dancers make the work look effortless, though from my seat towards the back of the theater, I can see the sweat shining off their faces. The dancers have slowed and their breathing exaggerated. Slow moving gestures of anguish and disbelief, shaking and swaying around the stage. I'm fascinated with the woman who's either silently screaming or yawning in the middle of heavy sobbing – I can relate to both. There is no music except for the stunning vocals of Ronya-Lee Anderson and Patrick Casimir. Dancers form a group that disappears out towards the upstage right corner, leaving two on stage with a pool of light. Anderson recites spoken word as Jessica Emily Peasant Mncube moves in a pool of light. This moment was extremely powerful. To have two mediums of communication – dance and speech – in such close proximity and performed live always leaves me empowered. Anderson cries out to the audience, "What's Going On?" while calling out President Barack Obama, the Supreme Court, and Marvin Gaye himself. The movement solo is dramatic, sharp, and distinguished. Peasant Mncube is an emotional dancer; having carried joy and excitement on her face most of the evening, she now wears a heavy pain. Her connection between the choreography and Anderson's words are symbiotic. She is the words.

The Dance Place Repertory Class blends in seamlessly with the cast, which has moved back on stage.

Powerful visuals are projected onto the back wall – images we're familiar with from the evening news, from our social media feeds, from our newspaper front pages. It's startling to realize there isn't a short stack of images Thomas could have chosen for his work. But it's important to not become desensitized. By enlarging these images across the back wall of the theater, Thomas is forcing us to remember where we were and how we felt the first time we saw these photos. It's extremely effective. He's igniting our spirits.

We were asked to bring out our mini-hand fans and discuss with those around us our celebrations and concerns. Shout-outs of diversity, unity, freedom and respect came as responses for our community celebrations. Politics-related fears emerged as concerns.

Thomas then presented us with a task, asking us what we're going to do about it? "How do you turn your concerns into celebrations?" In a theater filled with a diverse set of individuals, we are all charged with speaking to our communities to make a difference.

If you're looking for a typical, traditional dancer/audience relationship and experience, then by all means, please stay home. Do not go see *What's Going On?* Let someone else sit in the seat. However, if you're looking for an opportunity to witness and engage in a truly immersive and interactive performance that's as relevant to the time period in which Marvin Gaye wrote his music as it is today, then you need to immediately buy your ticket and see *What's Going On?* (they're going quickly!).

What's Going On? is a National Performance Network Creation Fund Project co-commissioned by Dance Place in partnership with King Arts Complex, Reston Community Center and NPN.

Performances at Dance Place, DC

Thursday, November 17 at 8pm

Friday, November 19 at 8pm

Saturday, November 20 at 4pm

Tickets for Dance Place performances:

https://danceplace.secure.force.com/ticket/#details_a0SG000000QCRxiMAH

February 22, 2017: Reston Center Stage – Reston, VA