

REVIEW: Maverick Lemons Dance Project presents “On the Brink” at Atlas Intersections Festival

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by Kacie Peterson

A small grouping of plastic crates is stacked upstage right; a single flickering candle sets a calming tone. It’s a feeling that would not last. The night exploded as cymbals crashed and dancers in purple hoodies dashed on stage in The Paul Sprenger Theater at the Atlas Intersections Festival on March 4th. Maverick Lemons Dance Project (MLDP) presented *On the Brink* and with this jarring beginning, it seemed they wanted to make certain we were awake and paying attention. We were ready.

The first piece was simply titled *Opening*. If this glimpse of movement was to set the tone for the rest of the night, we were in for one of loud noises, high-energy, and dynamic partnering. The dancers stood in place, though their bodies were racing against time, against the music. While Lemons’ choreography kept a whirlwind pace, a contradictory change of speed would have done well. There was such an intense emphasis on the necessity to keep moving, that the impact of speed was sometimes lost. The dancers’ purple hoods were up, making the men and women indistinguishable from each other. The piece ended abruptly, leaving me feeling like a car that slams the breaks to avoid running a red light: jolted.

Fast forward (no pun intended) to the end of the night with the *Closing*. It’s a repeat of the *Opening*, but the dancers (dressed again in purple zip-up hoodies) no longer have their hoods up. They continue to dash and dive, avoiding collision with each other, though it seems just narrowly. The reprise of the opening choreography appears to be the only connection to the rest of the program. The work is significantly different from the remainder of the program in message and style. There isn’t a clear point that Lemons appears to be making, except that his dancers can handle quick movement and loud sounds. But with the placement of the same movement on both ends of the program, Maverick has created a choreographic sandwich with the meat of the program where it should be – in the middle.

The meat of the program is broken into three main topics, which were prompted to the audience by words on the back screen. Each topic contained its own set of works. These works generally addressed different issues or moments in history within the main topic. His first topic of the evening was “JFK,” in which he delved into two separate pieces: *Cuban Missile Crisis* and *Where were you?* (*JFK’s assassination reflection*).

Lemons’ work is largely theatrical, calling upon the dancers to not only move, but to emote and sometimes speak throughout the works. Continuing this theme, Lemons combined pantomime with dance in an interesting application of the truest version of interpretive dance.

Cuban Missile Crisis opens with a black-and-white television segment, warning the audience of the impending Cold War. When the video spot ends, a white-shirted man walks in carrying a woman dressed in black. She’s board-stiff, carried vertically, one arm up. Placed on the ground, another white-shirted man pats her down, puts her arm down and then brings it back up. All three onstage characters are wearing red armbands. I’m imagining Lemons is creating the image of a gun (portrayed by the woman) being inspected by an officer. Once the inspection has passed, the original soldier picks her back up and carries her to another place on stage. The process is repeated with another male and female pairing. They, too, wear red armbands. The “guns” are placed at either downstage corner, in a crouch with arms out straight, their hands clasped together in the universal sign for gun. Are these characters the Russians? Two women enter, but they are wearing blue

armbands. There is a distinct “Us vs. Them” mentality being portrayed. The blue team signals amongst themselves, and then they signal to the red team, “We’re watching you.” Team blue is well-paired in movement and energy. We’re watching the Cold War unfold through, quite literally, an arms race.

The stage is cleared and the sound of three gunshots rings out. The background is blood red. A CBS newscaster informs us that President John F. Kennedy has been assassinated. The screen asks us, “Where were you?”

We listen to three personal accounts from the perspective of children. Each account is portrayed by a new individual, as the remainder sit in a half-circle holding flickering candles. Again, the monologues are performed theatrically. The majority of the movement is danced directly to the audience, though I felt that to see the soloists perform to the dancers in the half-circle could be a beneficial change of face.

We’re prompted with a new topic: “Then & Again.”

For the second piece in this topic, titled *Sit-in*, the lights came up on four individuals sitting on stools. A small group joined behind them. There was no music, only words. The group was loud and yelling; those seated remained still. The effrontery these individuals are channeling as they push, shove, and scream derogatory phrases at those seated is appalling. It was short, yet uncomfortably long when you remember that this is Lemons’ interpretation of real events. Real humans have willingly done these things to other humans. While unsettling, I think Lemons struck an important nerve, and I wish the piece had been continued.

Next up, *Freedom Riders* shows us that not only can Lemons’ dancers act, but they can sing as well. We ride with them through Washington, D.C., to Atlanta, and to their destination of Alabama. Lemons arranged his dancers in an obvious bus formation – one person to a seat on either side of the aisle. History tells us that the Freedom Riders were bombed upon arriving in the Deep South, and Lemons doesn’t shy away from portraying that. Dancers scattered on the ground, moaning, clutching each other. Lemons tends towards contractions to demonstrate the internal struggle with external motion. While Lemons’ dancers possess the ability to emote, I wanted more.

We arrived at a piece called *One Man*, a truly beautiful work with four grown men and two boys. They stand in a line in the darkness before the lights come up. Dressed in colorful hoodies and black pants, we’re reminded of the hoodie that splashed across television stations as we tried to comprehend how a young man lost his life because of the color of his skin and the clothing he wore on his back. Each of the six dancers has their chance with a contemporary solo. Each solo was expressive, highlighting the talents of the individual dancer. At the end of each solo, the dancer wrote something in the air. I only wish I could tell what it was.

“Millennium” is the next topic on the program’s schedule. We associate white with freedom, the light at the end of the tunnel, purity. Lemons plays on this as dancers in white opened the piece *Freedom* by walking across the stage from either side. While traveling, the dancers each briefly insert movement, before returning to a straight walk. They are transitioning from pedestrians to movers before our eyes, creating a beautiful motif that eventually becomes full dance movement across the floor. Lemons dancers are talented, though in a group setting, some look a tad under-rehearsed. The crates, which stood untouched until this point, are picked-up by each dancer. The piece ends strong with all the dancers standing on their crates.

It’s evident that Lemons is well-researched and encourages his dancers to be as well. He takes on important issues and events in our nation’s past and present with the ability to perform them before

an audience and challenge our feelings. Overall, I was impressed with Lemons' ability to make the past relevant in this show by bridging the gap between theater, movement, and emotion.