

## **REVIEW: SOLE Defined “Zaz: The Big Easy” at Dance Place**

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By Michelle Hayes

Entertainment, resilience, and emotion were the strong forces in SOLE Defined's *Zaz: The Big Easy* presented at Dance Place on February 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The story of a bar owner and the effects of Hurricane Katrina were told through tap dance, acting, singing, and multimedia.

As I entered the Dance Place theatre, I was taken to a bar-like atmosphere with dim lighting, a painted hard wood floor, and two table and chair set-ups on the stage space. The back of the performance area had a raised stage creating the bar scene, as if a live band would come out at any moment. Shortly after sitting, a male dressed in a buttoned shirt, red tie, and black dress pants started sweeping the raised part of the stage, occasionally in a specific rhythm. There was jazz music playing softly in the background (almost as if a band was warming up), but we could not see these musicians. Ryan Johnson, artistic director of SOLE Defined, came walking down the center aisle of the audience asking people as they came in “how you feeling” and “want some beads” as he carried Mardi Gras beads. He continued, “Let me see you dance for them!” As the audience members walked in, Johnson created a friendly, flirty, fun, and entertaining environment; similar to going to a bar where one may be a regular. He continued to the stage and performers in the character of waitstaff and a bartender entered the space.

Johnson introduced us to his bar, Zaz, in New Orleans. He began a dialogue, and he and the dancers performed their opening number with high energy, articulation, and sassy attitudes. We were invited into a world of jazz music and culture, seeing life in New Orleans through back and forth dialogue and quick tapping feet. This piece invited us into their world to learn more while being entertained.

There was a quartet of women that was fierce and strong through their presence and clear steps. Filled with shuffles and heel toes, the quartet was exact with their dynamic rhythms. Though their feet were often in unison, their upper bodies revealed their individual personalities, which continued throughout the whole show. Each voice was an important part of the group, even if I wasn't sure what the movement was trying to reveal about their voice. The first half for me was about entertainment and the performers inviting the audience into their world through dialogue and tapping.

They had clear character roles and clear spatial patterns, which created relationships with each other. The dancer playing the bartender role performed a solo while the others circled around and encouraged him through rhythms, shouts, and claps to compliment his performance.

The first act concluded with the waitstaff talking about the storm that was coming and needing to go home before it started. Ryan Johnson was left on the stage taking in his business and accomplishments, with a direct focus around the room, which brought him to interact with the audience. This brought us even more into his personal world. He broke up sections of the audience and taught different rhythms to each section. After each section had a rhythm, using hands or feet, we all played at the same time creating polyrhythms similar to the tapping. After orchestrating this short musical experience, Johnson left the stage leaving us wanting more.

The show started again with the red curtains opening to the set in disarray, and trash throughout the space. The storm had hit New Orleans. News videos were projected on the back wall of people

stranded on a bridge and families choosing to stay in their homes instead of going to a shelter. As well, there was video footage of people living in the Superdome stadium. The bar owner came onto the stage saying it had been the worst natural disaster America had seen, and yet no one cared. He began slowly walking through the space with heaviness in each step and heartbreak as he looked at his destroyed business. He let out what I thought was a laugh, which was confusing since his body was saying devastation through being hunched over. It took a couple times of this outburst to realize it was more like a cry of desperation. His desperation led into frustration and anger, which was voiced through heavy strong stomps and clapping rhythms intermixed with sobs. This led into a solo by Ryan Johnson, the bar owner, voicing his emotions about the destruction that took the city, his family, friends and business. With each stomp, clap, and slap there was confidence and resilience building. The emotion and sense of play in the polyrhythms were very engaging amidst the bar scene strewn with plastic bags on the floor.

This solo piece led into a section where company members entered the stage slowly and mournfully, each saying the title of someone close to them – like brother, sister, papa, granddad— whom they lost in the storm. They repeated this verbal pattern for a while creating more heaviness and vulnerability. A projection of a funeral celebration was occurring and drew me in as the company members started tapping across the raised stage. Dressed in a typical black and white New Orleans funeral style, they showed both grief and celebration. They spread white sand, which added another texture to the rhythms they could create. There was a moment where they came together traveling in a circular pattern, hunched over, moving up and down in a swinging motion, that made me think of an ancestral rebirth ceremony. They were in need of power and healing from above.

This second half was about the grief and mourning from the devastation but was also filled with resilience and coming together in hope for a better tomorrow despite the lack of support from the outside. This was seen through the spacial patterns of encouragement, as trios and duets danced for hope. A lot of the footwork seemed similar, but it was the story, personalities, and heart that created the substance. It was a “percussical” as stated in the program, a story told using percussive rhythms and musicality.

I really appreciated the rawness of the second act. There was not a lot of recorded music, which allowed me to hear the clarity of the rhythms of the taps. The unison movements and polyrhythmic moments were well rehearsed and clear. The first half had a lot of recorded music that interfered with the voices of the feet, causing me to strain to hear the craft of the elaborate sounds. The multimedia component of the show supported the themes and storyline but was not my main focus when there was dancing and acting occurring. It helped to create the environment with intention.

*Zaz: The Big Easy*, is a well-crafted “percussical” with the intention of educating audiences and encouraging relationships. Johnson plans to continue the work and hopes to one day have a live band to play the big band jazz music. He is determined in his pursuit of spreading the awareness about Hurricane Katrina. He hopes to change the way we think about disasters through disseminating the cultural effects Katrina had on New Orleans, as well as the overall lack of government support suffered by these catastrophe victims.