

REVIEW: Helanius J. Wilkins: A Bon Coeur

A Bon Coeur: Pages from a Journal

Helanius J. Wilkins

Dance Place

Washington, D.C.

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By Carmel Morgan



Longtime District choreographer Helanius J. Wilkins was warmly welcomed back to Dance Place, where he presented the world premiere of *A Bon Coeur: Pages from a Journal*, the second installment of a planned trilogy. Currently an assistant professor of dance at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Wilkins lived and choreographed in Washington, D.C., for eighteen years. Among his many honors while a District resident, he was a 2002 and 2006 Kennedy Center Local Dance Commissioning Project recipient and received the 2008 Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance.

A Bon Coeur (“a good heart”), Wilkins explained in a program note, explores place and cultural identity. A native of Louisiana, Wilkins pays homage to his roots in this work. The lobby of Dance Place filled with the smell of gumbo, and patrons had a chance to get a real taste of Louisiana prior to the performance.

Upon entering the theater, one encountered Wilkins at work, carrying sandbags. Looking like a frightened child, he grasped a sandbag like a pillow, tight to his stomach. Slightly hunched over, he slowly moved to place it alongside another. A sense of foreboding hovered in the accompanying

sounds of birds, bells, and water dripping (original music composed, arranged, and performed by Andy Hasenpflug). Hurricane Katrina immediately came to mind.

Through brilliant technical direction, lighting design and video content thanks to Roma Flowers, Iain Court, and Ian McMorrin, rain began to flow down a mesh screen covering the front of the stage. On the stage floor, too, rain fell and formed puddles. Then it became a relentless deluge; one could barely see Wilkins thrashing as if forcefully blown by the wind. Projections on huge panels at each side of stage showed street lights see-sawing in the wind and vehicles floating in the rising water. In this downpour, arms glued together in prayer, Wilkins violently shook. On the video backdrop, buildings around him toppled, he toppled as well, landing finally with his head on a sandbag. In the aftermath, Wilkins engaged his memory. In a house with wooden floors and tall windows, projected on three sides of the stage thanks again to the superb video elements, he danced softly as his tender voice narrated a loved letter to his former home. Wilkins' text was astoundingly lovely as he reflected that he was raised, shielded, educated, and corrupted by the Louisiana of his youth. He noted that in the gumbo that is his hometown there is "more than a dash of natural disaster." Subsequently, buildings magically rose again (the video played backwards), and Wilkins lifted and moved the sandbags.



In *A Bon Coeur's* final section, Wilkins, in an outrageous Mardi Gras outfit by Curtis Pierre, was joined by dancers from Light Switch Dance Theatre. A celebration ensued. The young dancers clapped, handed out Mardi Gras masks, and guided audience members in marching from the theater into the lobby.

Until its jubilant end, *A Bon Coeur* meandered. I nonetheless appreciated Wilkins' leisurely approach. Although less about dance prowess and more about honoring his personal history, I didn't have difficulty connecting with the work.

Photos Mark Hoelscher, courtesy Dance Place

Carmel Morgan began her dance training in Knoxville, Tenn., where she became a founding member of the Tennessee Children's Dance Ensemble, the country's only professional modern dance company using artists 8-17 years of age. While living in Memphis, Tenn., she danced with the modern dance collective Project: Motion and also performed with the modern dance improvisation troupe Breeding Ground. Carmel began working as a freelance dance critic for what is now CriticalDance.com in February 2007, and previously served on the board of the Dance Critics Association. She has been enjoying dance in the DC Metro area for more than a decade. When not writing about dance, Morgan works as an attorney for the U.S. government.