

REVIEW: LOAD – a collaboration between darlingdance & Eames Armstrong

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DC Arts Center

October 11, 2018

By Val Oliphant



Opening days after the Kavanaugh hearings, the feminist postmodern dance company darlingdance, in collaboration with artist Eames Armstrong, premiered *LOAD*, an experimental dance performance exploring the intention of touch, physical and emotional weight bearing, and systems of support. Music by local electronic experimental musicians complemented the bizarre and creative exploration of feminist issues in the choreography. The sound score ignored conventional composition and aesthetics, instead preferring various pedestrian sounds such as those of cars, silverware, and whirring fans.

When I arrived at the DC Arts Center, the audience milled about the two exhibits, one on queer erotica, and the other textiles, while waiting for the house to open. Both exhibits asked the viewer to think about the social constructions of race, sexuality, and gender; setting the tone for the performance we were about to see.

As we entered the intimate theater space, two dancers casually chatted on the stairs at the upper right-hand corner. Their voices were drowned out by loud street noises. As the lights dimmed, two others joined the dancers, all repeatedly touching their left shoulder and then right hip as they walked about.

In the next scene, a leg provocatively peeked from behind a curtain. Eventually the person emerged, holding a large poster board smiley face in front of her face, sitting on the edge of the stairs, girlishly swinging her legs. The remaining three dancers emerged one by one, each embodying a different persona: a bow-legged cowgirl shooting finger guns, a shy dancer sliding her foot around in a circle, and a provocative gym rat squatting, lunging, and can-can dancing around the stage. As the music changed to upbeat techno, they happily jumped around as if at a house party.

As the music became more aggressive, so did the dancing. Removing their masks, the dancers pushed and shoved, grabbing one another by the wrist, struggling in a blob until they eventually ended in a dog pile on the floor. The music engendered a feeling of anxiety, making me worry for the dancers as one somersaulted into the pile nearly landing on someone's head, while another was pulled into awkward splits. I hoped they wouldn't accidentally hurt each other.

They finally exhausted themselves (and the audience!) lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling. After resting, they formed a circle— a tangle of limbs in a tight group hug. Legs emerged from a seemingly impossible angle, as one escaped the embrace. She began to lie on the floor, eventually deciding to try to rejoin the group. However, no matter how hard she pushed, she was forced to stay out. On her own, she began to despondently stare at the ceiling.



One of the last scenes examined the nature of true friendships that are supportive and encourage our ability to stand up, recover, and be resilient, given that we all fall apart at some point. As the music grew lighter, the four dancers created endearing tableaux: arms around each other's shoulders with faces pressed together. One at a time each dancer went slack, falling to the floor. The others struggled to pull up her dead weight. As they got her to stand, she gained her feet, rejoining the group hug.

I was surprised at how thought provoking this short 45-minute show was. I left the theater considering all the ways we support each other individually and collectively as a society. In a [2013 interview with DC Metro Arts](#), choreographer Hayley Cutler described her aesthetic as 'abstract, dark-humored, and off-putting.' Her work, *LOAD*, has certainly continued to embody that space, thankfully with some moments of comic reprieve.

Top photo credit Chris Chen, bottom photo credit Renee Regan

Valerie Oliphant is originally from Arizona, where she studied dance and international studies at the University of Arizona, including a study abroad dance program in Ghana. She currently teaches pole and aerial dance at Jordin's Paradise and myofascial release and stretching for Praktika Wellness. She enjoys writing about movement and dance for her personal blog, [move your story](#), and for the DC Dance Journalism project.