

Dance review: Bodiography's moving 'Whispers' explores children's loss, healing

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By Sara Bauknecht / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Sometimes movement can unlock emotions words cannot.

Choreographer Maria Caruso tapped into this Martha Graham-esque sentiment when her company, Bodiography Contemporary Ballet, premiered last weekend "Whispers of Light: A Story of Hope," inspired by ways children grapple with grief.

For Bodiography devotees, the work was a change for Ms. Caruso, whose productions the past couple of years have involved medical themes and relationships with local surgeons and patients. This time, she collaborated with the Highmark Caring Place, a support system for children coping with loss.

In "Whispers," their journeys were brought to life at the Byham Theater. The piece opened with 14 of them moving about a black bare stage in and out of a beam of white light. Some appeared to be teens, while others looked not more than 4 or 5 years old. Their clothing varied from a motorcycle vest and pants to party dresses in pops of bright colors -- references to the likes and interests of lost loved ones.

Early scenes were more direct, at times even literal, in interpretation. Company members clad in black blazers and fitted capris or short dresses, representing Caring Place volunteers, performed en pointe. Their gestures -- a hand lifted to the ear or face buried in hands -- were repetitive, almost robotic, perhaps a nod to death's tendency to appear again and again.

Another literal scene was when the children returned to center stage to color memory boxes, a common craft project at the Caring Place. The "volunteers" danced around them, sometimes stopping to watch or comment on their progress. From here, the ballet branched into nine vignettes that delved deeper into each child's story. Ms. Caruso portrayed an elegant butterfly, a symbol of hope at Caring Place, who escorted each child (or pair of children, if they were related) onto the stage. As dancers shared the children's experiences through choreography, kids painted a 4-by-4-foot canvas on an easel at the side of the stage, a bit difficult to see for anyone seated right of center.

Many times, dancers' clothes and the colors splashed across the back wall of the stage played off the colors or styles the children wore. Faster-paced instrumentals, harsh red lighting, body twitches and dancers leaping and catching each other mid-jump were some of the hints at a loss filled with angst. Slower tempos and softer solo steps suggested a child's more internalized battle. Among the more poignant of these vignettes were those when dancers shed their pointe shoes and classical approach for contemporary choreography danced barefoot. These more grounded, organic movement phrases better captured at times the rawness of mourning and healing.

It was ambitious for Bodiography to highlight nine family stories. Because the number was so large and

their stories were conveyed so abstractly, we never got to know much more about these children than we did at the beginning. This universalized the ballet, allowing the audience to project its own views and experiences with death onto each vignette. But if the work's point is to really tell about these children, perhaps narrowing the focus to just four or five of them would strengthen the connection the audience has with them.

The score by Nancy Galbraith, performed by the Pittsburgh Festival Orchestra, excelled at capturing the hills and valleys of grieving. The largely instrumental work -- sprinkled with occasional fragments of lyrics -- swept naturally from reverent and ominous to more urgent and back again, a perfect complement to the arc of dancers' performances.

The piece concluded on a lighter note, with children lined across the stage to watch their canvases pieced together to form a pale blue butterfly. "Whispers of Light" managed to turn a subject as messy and emotional as death into something tangible and orderly.

But let's not forget the beauty that can be uncovered from life's messes and imperfections. What if the children wanted to color their canvases different colors one night, or scribble or doodle on them instead of following the ballet's almost paint-by-numbers approach? What if they felt compelled to just sit by the easel and watch the dancers one night, leaving their portion of the sketch uncolored? Weaving more of these nuggets of individuality into the work could tap into even greater depths of emotion, loss and healing.

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