

Recently the Facebook world has been abuzz with news of American Ballet Theatre dancer Misty Copeland. A trending headline reads that “Under Armour settles whether ballet is an art or a sport” in the video that features her electric presence. That headline has a fatal flaw, though. It assumes that dance is something that *can* be settled and, in the case of the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation, it is most decidedly not.

The Sunday, August 2nd performance of The Gathering included plenty of art, sport, and even physics, reminding the audience that dance has the ability to constantly be reimagined. It is never static. The five performers in this evening treated their viewers to an intimate celebration of all that is unexpected, from vocal intonations to furniture crashes, and illustrated how important it is for dance to be defined not by headlines but by those who practice it.

The pervasive feeling to the evening was one of joy. Kirstie Simson gracefully extended her hands to the audience and smiled as she began walking, inviting them to share in the hour-long spectacle of trust and innovation that was to follow. With Thomas Schumacher’s piano music that was by turns classical or minimalist (though never discordant), she and fellow dancers Michael Schumacher, Darrell Jones, and Mark Haim engaged in whirling explorations of the Velocity Founder’s Theatre that often took the form of teasing solos or duets. Use of a floodlamp on the floor made Mark Haim contract into a variety of positions as its rays lit him; he also sang a short phrase about how it was “a little bit funny...” to have the light dancing with him.

Though there were some tense moments when all four dancers would solemnly circle the room, their improvisations seemed to capture the delight of stretching limbs to the fullest and being one with their space: they cuddled the wall, supported each others’ soundless falls, and hinged upwards with the delicacy of tightrope walkers. At one point, Thomas Schumacher trailed Simson with a set of bells, shadowing and teasing her movements, but ultimately adopting her journey as his own. The five performers were clearly a family in their environment.

Among the most breathtaking of the night’s events was a double duet late in the show. With Thomas Schumacher and Haim at the piano, Michael Schumacher and Simson danced with purposeful abandon in the cool uplighting. The rapport that both couples held with each other entranced the audience and allowed for quirky, turned-in body positions to flow harmoniously into gentler phrases that experimented with simple touches and whirls. Michael Schumacher, in particular, kept his movement quality fresh throughout the night. He glided with the ease of a moth and ate up space magnificently, though never overpowering the ideas of his colleagues. Haim’s choices, by contrast, tended towards the more staccato, and were peppered with ironic stillness that dared the audience to reevaluate the emotional charge that had motivated the scene.

The Gathering ended with an extended, mysterious interplay between Jones and Simson that focused all energies into one central location. As the other three performers stood silently in a type of Greek chorus, the two rolled slowly and luxuriously across a

pool of light. Their task was necessary in its arduousness: bit by bit, they detached their limbs from one another and faded off to the edges of the room. With ritual complete, all five performers stood together for a ready round of applause from the packed crowd.

These dancers were a polished prelude to the SFDI closing night performances which followed at 9:30pm, priming the room for the eleven vastly different pieces that lay ahead. Though all program notes were given informally by two festival participants, the actual dances displayed a highly cerebral level of planning and inspired execution. It would have been fascinating to see the ensemble works turned into full-length projects, as many of them gave tantalizing tastes of ideas but ultimately left questions unanswered. Particularly mesmerizing was the fragmentation of four restless performers in a piece that involved furniture and glasses of water; the solo “portrait of the artist as a young man” was also a powerful bit of vocabulary distilled into one undulating episode.

Perhaps ballerina Misty Copeland left something settled where the athleticism of classical ballet is concerned. After all, ballet is a codified practice steeped in tradition. But dance on the whole? There are no boundaries to its interpretation, as the Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation aptly demonstrated. A two-show evening at SFDI was filled with moments that excited, surprised, and amused, proving that the only settled thing about dance is the full commitment that it requires.