

Review: Counter Cantor the highlight of Fall for Dance North's new season

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Anne Plamondon and Belinda McGuire in Counter Cantor.
BRUCE ZINGER

There's been an ongoing debate in the dance world about the "all-female" program. Is framing female choreographers as a theme a sensible way to amplify an underrepresented voice in the industry? Or is this approach a form of othering that reduces women to a promotional gimmick? I tend to agree with the latter camp and admire presenters who pack their programs with female artists without making that a marketing ploy. Such is the case with Fall for Dance North's expanded 2018 season, which opened Tuesday night.

Based on New York's 15-year-old Fall for Dance, our version of the festival offers newcomers an enticing introduction to contemporary dance and ballet and, for aficionados, an opportunity to see both new and iconic work from around the world – for \$15. Now in its fourth year in Toronto, artistic director Ilter Ibrahimof has added a second stage, at the Ryerson Theatre, to complement the Sony Centre program.

Commissions aren't new to FFDN, but Counter Cantor, a duet for two women choreographed by Canadians Anne Plamondon and 23-year-old Emma Portner, is the most developed and satisfying work I've seen come out of the festival yet. Ottawa-born Portner's career is exploding, with a recent commission at Hubbard Street Dance in Chicago and a premiere at the New York City Ballet in 2019. Due to illness, she was replaced by Belinda McGuire Tuesday, but her tense, rough-and-tumble aesthetic was all over the piece.



After each performing a solo, Plamondon and McGuire come together, tussling and offering each other support.
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McGuire is a powerhouse as a dancer – creaturely, mercurial, sometimes downright weird. Her opening solo is Counter Cantor’s artistic acme – an arresting depiction of internal anguish set on a mostly dark stage. Portner’s choreography often looks like constrained improvisation; the body’s centre of gravity is low, the ribcage is frequently contracted and no movement is disconnected from the one that comes before. On a technical level, McGuire has more extension and openness than Portner, so her substitution had an interesting effect: The off-balance convulsions and robotic fiddling were greater, amplifying the sense of turbulence and doom.

But it’s not all despair and darkness. The music (by Dustin O’Halloran, Olivier Fairfield and Travis Lake) alternates between rich, classical effusions and spare, industrial tones. There’s stillness that can invoke waves of nostalgia and regret. Plamondon has a solo immediately following McGuire’s, after which the dancers come together, tussling and offering each other support. There’s an ambiguity in their relationship that needs more of an emotional arc to cohere, but the piece is still fierce and captivating.

Another program highlight is Lucinda Childs’ 2015 work *Canto Ostinato*, performed by Introdans, a company from Arnhem in the Netherlands. Childs is an American postmodernist who made her name in the 1960s, and her work is almost mathematical in its exploration of space, form and pattern, using simple, repetitive sequences with no ornamental flourishes. The aesthetic has the strange, ascetic power of a writing style without adjectives; its purity draws you in. None of this icy beauty is forsaken by the four Introdans performers, who all have a strong classical base and perform with just the right sense of restraint.



Myriam Allard performs *Rite*.
LEVENT ERUTKU /BALLET KELOWNA

The Montreal-based dancer/choreographer Myriam Allard, of the company *La Otra Orilla*, begins the evening with some arresting flamenco in an excerpt from *Rite*, set to Hedi Graja's gorgeous, elegiac singing. Allard is larger than life on stage, and her choreography is inflected with small contemporary details.

The evening was wrapped up by Alys Pires's crowd-pleasing *Mambo* performed by Ballet Kelowna and set to a medley of jazz classics. The 2017 piece uses lots of synchronized ensemble work, which makes for easy watching, but lacks the complexity that impressed me so much in Pires's *In Between* at the National Ballet's choreographic workshop in January. Fall for Dance North continues at Toronto's Ryerson Theatre and Sony Centre until Oct. 6.