

The Middlebury Campus

Dance Project Pays Tribute to Center for the Arts

by Alan Sutton / clifford symposium (0) in Arts & Sciences / October 3, 2012



Three dancers express their various emotion for the Kevin P. Mahaney Center for the Arts and all of the space within which inspires creativity of all forms and style. (Campus/Gregory Woolston)

There is a wonderful building that many of us walk past and through each day. Some see this place as a second home, a daily destination, a place of creation. To prospective students and their families who are bound to walk through it during their first brief visit to the campus, the Kevin P. Mahaney '84 Center for the Arts might just seem like a conglomeration of its angular halls and ceilings.

"A Curious Invasion/Middlebury," an hour-long site-specific dance project performed at this year's Clifford Symposium, served as an invitation to reimagine and rediscover the building in its 20th year of existence, as performances last weekend drew throngs of curious students and community members.

Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig of PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER guided the creation of the piece with the help of five of their company's professional dancers and 13 Middlebury College students. The performance itself unearthed remarkable ways of enjoying the building's space.

At the beginning of each performance, nearly 100 people gathered near the railing of the upper lobby to look down at the dancers, who had gathered at the lowest level of the building. It was, quite purposefully, impossible to see the entire company at once. In an imitation of the building itself, the details of the piece brought it to life: a moment of stillness contrasted with the rapid singing of the live violin, or the image of moving bodies drawing circles on the wooden floor below with only their pounding footsteps as accompaniment.

The journey continued as the company drew the audience downstairs and outside, sometimes in the face of Vermont's rainy September weather. Outside the dancers reimagined their environment, transforming lamps into dance partners, tables into stages and the grey metallic wall on the back of the art museum — in all its strength and weariness — into a partner in the action, as two dancers dressed in bright colors explored its exterior. The CFA, in its size and angular irregularity, can be monstrous.

A great deal of work went into delivering the experience in such a short period of time. Student dancers committed over 30 hours to rehearsal, preparation and performance in just seven days. Many felt exhausted after the first day of performances, and some laughed about the bruises gathered from sliding on wood and stone. The lessons they took away from the experience, however, were well worth the effort.

Hannah Pierce '13 emphasized the importance of collaboration, an overarching theme in this year's Clifford Symposium, in getting this project up in just a week.

"Pearson and Widrig] made this piece around the building, but they didn't come in with a piece," said Pierce. "It's been about blending ideas from the choreographers and the other artists."

Adeline Cleveland '13.5 took other lessons from the welcoming yet demanding atmosphere, where ideas from student dancers, professional dancers and directors were all valued.

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“Another part of the process has been for me to try something and for it not to work,” she said.

Directors Pearson and Widrig created their first site-specific performance at Coney Island in 1987. Since then they have taken their work around the country and as far away as Switzerland, India and Japan, but their process is similar everywhere.

“We walk around [a space for the first time] without speaking, listening to the space,” said Pearson.

“We see the space, the architecture, the environment as a partner,” Wildred added. “What can we do to make it come alive? The piece is already there, but it has to be unearthed.”

Everything about the piece was created in the building, for the building and in full sensorial reach of anyone who happened to be passing through.

Unlike most other creative work brought to the College, the audience could be anyone who, by chance or by choice, passed through the site.

“Art is a way of bringing a heightened awareness to every moment,” explained Pearson, expressing how the goal is to go into the unknown with the audience, even in a familiar space.

“Their habitual ways in the space, with themselves, are shattered,” she added.

The project was filmed as a celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Dance Company of Middlebury. Also, the performance involved three alumni who are now professional dancers, as well as a number of faculty members who joined the group. Overall, the project opened up a new way of experiencing the building for everyone involved, and the professional company felt welcome and pleased with their visit.

“The students, they’re really smart, they’re alert, they know how to focus, and they’ve been willing to ride this wave with us,” said Pearson, before warming up for a filming session.

PEARDONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER posts a significant portion of video material on their website, www.pearsonwidrig.org. Footage from the weekend’s performance has not yet appeared.

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