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## Theater &amp; Dance

# PearsonWidrig DanceTheater's 'Rapture': A big jumble with a big heart

By Sarah Kaufman

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Nothing made sense in “Rapture,” a new work that PearsonWidrig DanceTheater performed Saturday at Dance Place. But if this first showing was a jumble — a big jumble, to be exact — at least it was a big jumble with a big heart.

Art, to paraphrase “Damn Yankees,” is only half skill. The other half is something else, something bigger, and whatever you call it — heart, commitment, passion — Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig have it.

Their works have a quirky, surreal quality and can be completely befuddling if you stop to ponder why, for instance, the dancers are screaming at one point, breaking into song at another or playing hand-slap games later on, for no apparent reason. But why stop and ponder? It was almost enough to be swept along by the piercing intensity of “Rapture’s” brief vignettes, performed as if they were absolutely the proper thing to do on, say, Mars. There was no logic, and the dancers owned that.

This was not a piece about religious resurrection. This was small-r rapture and everyday ecstasies. In a program note, Pearson refers to her concept of rapture as “a heightened sense of one’s life,” through moments of fierce emotion and playfulness. There were plenty of these in the work, but as they accumulated, so did a feeling of randomness. The piece found a focus when Widrig burst into it, in a flower-print outfit with slicked-back hair and narrow, techno-looking spectacles. He began to prance grandly across a trail

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of flower-festooned doormats, in perfect time with the music's bouncy, otherworldly beat. He was an ingenious comic god, imperious and sly. He never reappeared, sadly, and without him, "Rapture" slid back into randomness.

The evening included "Guete Flug," a monologue Pearson performed while walking forward and back along an invisible grid. In it, we learn of the fatal illness of her Swiss father-in-law — Widrig's father — and of his strength in facing death. Pearson's repetitive steps conveyed a sense of receding time, and they also echoed the calm, orderly spirit of the man and his last days. Perhaps the steady pattern also evoked the progress of Pearson's emotions, from turmoil to peace. "Guete Flug" was as direct and simple as "Rapture" was messy. But the two works were interconnected, offering different but deeply felt views of how to frame a life.

Pearson and Widrig are dance professors at the University of Maryland, positions that, relatively speaking, afford them a certain luxury of time and resources to create, and this was apparent. In "Rapture," the dancers were costumed in chic black-and-white flower-print outfits by Sali Treek and Rebecca Delapp. Ben Levine created deep shadows and bleached brightness with his lighting design, making full use of the new equipment Dance Place acquired during its recent renovation.

But the biggest treat was the confident rapport among the dancers, evidence of the works' unhurried incubation and spirit of collaboration. The company members raved about this in a post-performance discussion, but the results had spoken for themselves.

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