Tech tricks add dimension to ADF’s Pilobolus

By Roy C. Dicks

DURHAM — In its 40th year, Pilobolus continues to amaze and amuse. This weekend’s American Dance Festival program again proves how the company turns the most sophisticated audiences into wide-eyed kids.

New technologies are adding dimension to the company’s gymnastics-based works. For “All Is Not Lost,” the first of three premieres, collaborators OK Go and Trish Sie (creator of the band’s popular YouTube videos) project live video images onto a screen. A camera underneath a huge glasslike table allows kaleidoscopic views as the dancers slide and roll across it. Actions shift from swimming to space walking, creating caterpillarlike creatures as they go. At just six minutes, the piece evokes more wonder and delight than many companies’ full evenings.

The slightly longer “Seraph” employs talents from MIT’s Distributed Robotics Laboratory, which supply UFO-like objects that fly silently around dancer Matt Del Rosario as they blink various colors. The effect inspires joyful gasps as dancer and machines interact, but the idea needs more development to move beyond the gimmick level.

“Korokoro” is a 25-minute work in collaboration with Japanese Butoh choreographer Takuya Muramatsu. Six dancers begin as weak, trembling forms making repeated efforts to stand upright and connect with one another. The atmosphere is primal, the actions evolutionary. The dancers astound in their balance, strength and flexibility, combining into different forms and emerging as new two-person creatures after an apocalyptic event. The piece conjures mesmerizing alien worlds, but several sections go on longer than the concept can sustain.

Two pieces from the company’s first decade confirm its permanent place in dance history. “Untitled” begins as a bucolic outing by two women in long dresses whose sudden doubling in height comes from male dancers beneath. What seems lightly comic soon turns Freudian as these hidden men are released from underneath, their nude bodies in stark contrast to the women’s nattily dressed gentlemen suitors. The psychological layers still fascinate.

“Day Two” is Moses Pendleton’s vision of the dawn of creation, where humans enact fierce rituals and primitive creatures skitter about. The dancers’ glistening bodies astonish in their athletic sensuality as they form unbelievable structures. The curtain call, in which dancers slide across a water-slicked stage, puts the cap on a must-see event.

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