

United Kingdom

Let's Dance International Frontiers

Various Venues, Leicester – April 29 to May 13, 2017

PHILADANCO FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Joan Myers Brown has been a force on the US dance scene for decades, receiving numerous awards for her work developing and promoting black Americans in dance, and shattering the many barriers that face them. Now 47-years after its founding, her widely admired Philadelphia-based company finally made its UK debut at the Curve as part of this year's *Let's Dance International Frontiers* (LDIF) festival in Leicester.

A varied programme by choreographers largely unknown this side of the Atlantic opened with *Between the Lines* by

Francisco Gella, inspired by the architectural drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright. Danced to selections by Philip Glass and full of precise choreography, the work showcased the dancers' classical technique well while always maintaining a contemporary outlook, gorgeous duets evolving easily from the impressive ensemble work. At times, there's a near-romantic feel, Natasha Guruleva's sophisticated black costumes adding to the mood. However, while structured and flowing pleasingly, Gella's choreography lacks the originality of the architect's work.

Ray Mercer's *Super 8!* is a dance of changing moods for four couples that acknowledges everyday experiences. Again pleasant and neatly constructed, none of the relationships

are given time to develop, and the work fails to make much of a mark.

Things shifted up several notches with the compelling *Movement for Five* by Dawn Marie Bazemore, by far the strongest work of the evening. Politically potent, it is inspired by the injustices surrounding the "Central Park Five", a group of black and Latino teenagers wrongly convicted of raping a white female jogger in New York in 1989. The opening section grabs you immediately, the social landscape set out in dance littered with moments of aggression: a push, a shove, a confrontation. The anthem "Fight the Power" is heard. At the heart of the piece is a riveting solo by Jah'meek D Williams, full of grotesque writhing and silent screams that articulate dramatically the injustices

the men suffered. While the final section sees them try to move on after the real perpetrator of the crime finally confesses, it seems the pain of 14 years in jail clearly lives on. *Movement for Five* may be rooted in events almost 30 years ago, but as we continue to hear about attitudes towards black men by police in parts of the US, it very much strikes a contemporary chord too.

Helped along by Steve Reich's driving *The Four Sections*, former Alvin Ailey soloist Christopher Huggins' increasingly fast-paced *Enemy Behind the Gate* brought things to a stamina-sapping conclusion, the choreography giving the dancers the chance to show off their athleticism.

This may have been *Philadanco's* first visit to these shores, but I hope it's not the last. They are



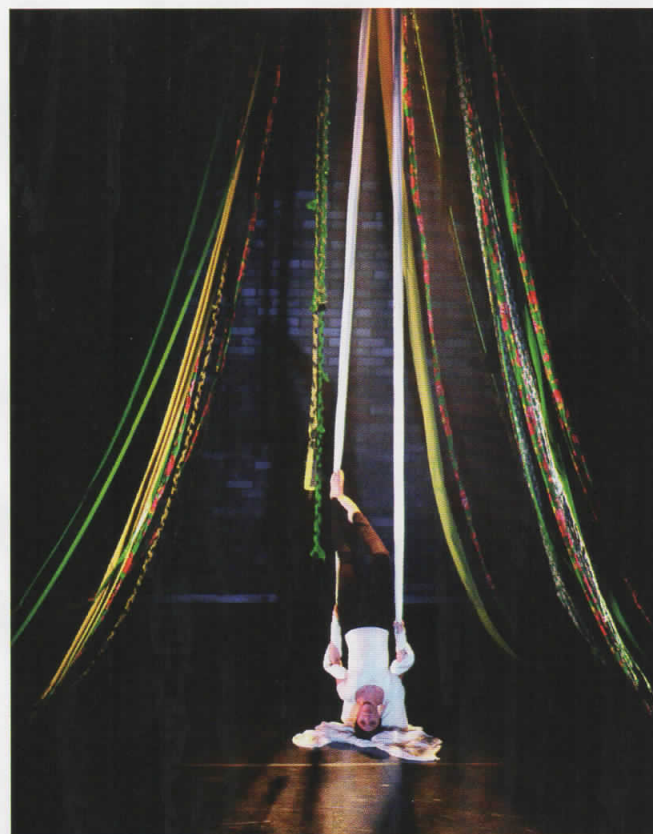
clearly a versatile group of dancers whose technique shines through. Next time, though, it would be good to see them bring more choreography that remains etched in the memory, and on a larger stage that allows them to give full throttle to the choreography and their energy.

There was plenty to see elsewhere in LDIF, which goes from strength to strength, with audience attendance up again. Opening the festival amid the Victorian elegance of the Kings Ballroom at the Grand Hotel, a space that had not seen dance for many years, **Urban Bush Women** returned to perform founding artistic director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's *Walking with 'Trane Side B*. Very different to *Side A*, such a hit last year, the playful sections are a particular joy.

At the Attenborough Arts Centre, everyone was struck by the power of **Asha Thomas**, a contemporary

dancer from the US and UK-born flamenco dancer **Yinka Esi Graves**, who came together in *CLAY*, an exploration of identity. The two styles make for a fascinating mix as the pair explore the connections between who they believe themselves to be, and the unconscious parts that make up who they are.

Identity was also to the fore in many of the works in *Signatures*, a platform for upcoming artists. Among those making a particular mark this year was **Mac Palima**, whose *Sekseneutraal*, a look at masculine and feminine code in movement, was full of strong clear lines, and posed some important questions. Also impressive was *Papillon* by **Ella Mesma**, a solo about her experience as someone with one black and one white parent, and considering how this affects how others see her. She drew comparison with the transformation from a caterpillar to a



Above: Ella Mesma in *Papillon*.
Bottom left and right: Phildanco in two scenes from *Movement for Five*.

butterfly, and oppression to freedom. At times audacious, at times defiant, what shone through was the very personal nature of the feelings embodied.

DAVID MEAD

