

Doug Elkins at Annenberg

The evolution of Doug Elkins

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Every performance is a kind of conversation between the artist and his or her audience. Sometimes what the artist wants to communicate is vague and ephemeral; sometimes it's crystal clear. Choreographer Doug Elkins held both kinds of conversations with his audience this past weekend when he brought two new works to the Annenberg Center.



Echoes of Chaplin and Fred Astaire, too.

Elkins built his early reputation by infusing his playful and energetic choreography with a distinctly urban sensibility, utilizing the language of break dancing and hip-hop. Now, after almost three decades of growth, he has infused his dance with a variety of other styles, other voices from around the world. The result, as is always the case with Elkins, is fresh and dynamic.

A Chaplin vaudeville

The first program of the evening was a comedic piece called “Hapless Bizarre,” a pleasant and amusing but not particularly memorable piece that draws its inspiration from

burlesque. It began with a skillful and witty routine between two dancers and a hat, to music that evoked primitive 1920s vinyl records. I felt I was watching a recreation of a classic Charlie Chaplin routine. If you're going to be inspired by vaudeville, who better to inspire you than Chaplin?

A circus-downlike dancer bounced around the stage, both in sync and in counterpoint to the other dancers, continuing to present a Chaplinesque presence as the other dancers moved gracefully from one segment to another, from jazz to flamenco and back again.

I liked the way the lights and the costumes played off each other. The light-saturated scrim backdrop was always colored in such a way that the colors on the dancers contrasted vibrantly, with each dancer at times becoming a moving neon figure.

Othello meets Marvin Gaye

The evening's engaging second piece, "Mo(or)town/Redux" was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* by way of a Motown-derived soundtrack. It was more ballet in the sense that the tragic story of Othello and his wife Desdemona was told efficiently and effectively by four dancers (two couples). Even if you don't know the Othello story, you could easily follow it here.

The Moor made an effective entrance with a solo dance with a microphone stand that reminded me of the classic Fred Astaire dance with a coat rack in *Royal Wedding*. (Click [here](#).) And, as the piece progressed, I became impressed by how Elkins worked that damned handkerchief into the choreography.

The music, of course, was fabulous, comprised of expertly edited samples from classic Motown artists like Marvin Gaye and the Jackson 5, among many others.

At some moments, though, the dancers could have been stronger. Not that they weren't good, but they got me imagining how the piece could have been improved with a stronger delivery. This was particularly the case during the sequence where Othello and Iago first express their mutual antagonism, which wasn't nearly as dramatic and suspenseful as it could have been.

We know how the story ends, and as Othello's and Desdemona's final *pas de deux* progresses, I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. I realized what I was watching: the violent brutalization of an innocent woman, something I'd never seen portrayed in dance before. And when that final moment arrived, and the deed was done, I found myself catching my breath.

That's when I realized that I had just seen a major work.



