

# *Black Grace at the Annenberg Center*

## Calisthenics as dance

Gary L. Day

February 17, 2015

in *Dance*



One of the many pleasures of covering the Dance Celebration program at the Annenberg Center is the discovery of new and unfamiliar dance companies and choreographers, some of which are at the beginning of illustrious careers. This season has presented a number of new companies a mere few years old; as such, I have been privileged to see a substantial amount of fresh and exciting new work.

**Black Grace:** A repeatedly recycled routine of calisthenics

The flip side of this is that fresh new choreographers and companies may not have grown out of their artistic adolescence. Talented they may be, but their craft may not yet be honed. Such was the case with Black Grace, a relatively new company from New Zealand that made its debut at the Annenberg Center last week.

Black Grace was founded by Neil Ieremia in 1995, which means that both company and choreographer should be passing out of its early adolescent promise and entering into a more mature creative phase. The choreography in the program I saw last week was a mixed bag, full of exuberance and young promise, yet lacking the heft of a mature artist.

### **From Bach to Elvis**

The program consisted of four short pieces and one longer piece, all recent pieces choreographed by Ieremia making their Philadelphia debuts. If there is one word that describes Ieremia's choreography, it is *athletic*. The young and vital mixed-gender company seemed like it was constantly flying across the stage, giving form to an interesting soundtrack that went from Bach to Elvis Presley. But what was initially exciting and exuberant grew tedious in its excessive repetition and limited choreographic vocabulary. What started as exciting athleticism after a while reminded me of nothing so much as a repeatedly recycled routine of calisthenics.

One aspect of the program was interesting, if not entirely successful, was a focus on Pacific Islander culture. Granted, Pacific Islander culture has often been given short shrift by the American cultural scene. There were times, however, when Ieremia's penchant for the obvious, particularly the use of backdrops featuring multicultural images, seemed the work of a particularly young, if talented, artist, and not one who should be on the verge of mature expression.

### **Let there be light**

One major complaint: the really bad lighting. Throughout a majority of the program, the dancers (an able and attractive bunch) performed in shadows. Once again, I implore lighting designers for all dance companies everywhere: let us *see* the dancers who are up there giving us their all.

The audience responded quite enthusiastically, and I could see why. The troupe comes across as fresh and enthusiastic, with a message of multiculturalism we can all get behind. Unfortunately, though, the company and its choreographer have yet to mature into their potential.