

A Review of Toronto Dance Theatre's *Berlin/Toronto Project*

By Paula Citron

Berlin/Toronto Project

Toronto Dance Theatre

Choreographed by Felix Marchand and Christoph Winkler

Performed by the eleven dancers of the TDT Ensemble

At Winchester Street Theatre

Christopher House, artistic director of Toronto Dance Theatre, feels it is important to bring international dance voices to the city. He spear-headed the *Berlin/Toronto Project* which brought Felix Marchand and Christoph Winkler from Germany to Toronto to set works on the TDT dancers. The two men split the company, with Marchand getting six, and Winkler five dancers.

It turned out to be a supremely engaging event, and one that brought Europe to Toronto in terms of sensibilities. With Marchand, it was taking his own sweet time to develop his dance. In the 30 second sound bite, North American culture, many things from Europe seem slow, but Marchand didn't care. We were on his timetable. With Winkler, it was the droll, sly, wise sophistication that infected his work, so different from a society that is more open, immediate and obviously in your face. His was a piece of subtlety and whimsy, and we had to reorder our brains accordingly.

Marchand engaged pure movement for his challenging *Awareness Etudes for 6 performers and an audience*. He began with the six dancers, eyes closed, slowly becoming conscious of their bodies. The arc of the piece then passed through distorted floor work, to upright, tortuous positioning, to finally the most infectiously joyous jumps ever to be seen. The choreographer trained in release technique and that was at the core of his movement. It was all

about dancers in total control of their bodies and then letting go with abandon.

The dancers came in individually, took a place on the stage, closed their eyes, and in silence (which is never easy for North American audiences) got to know the sensations of their total bodies, bending, shaking, reaching, while engaging in rather humorous facial expressions. When they did look at the audience, it was with invitation. They knew, and we knew, we were there together.

A slap, or a stamp, from one or other of the dancers, was like a sonic wave that galvanized the group to ramp up their physicality. First there was the travelling ground work. Each dancer had a different part of his or her body touching the floor and they had to find ways of moving horizontally, whether it was the elbow, the head or shoulder that was the root and anchor. They looked like weird beach crabs, but it also became very clear that they had to keep track of each other so that their spacing was in harmony.

The next phase was repetitive physicality executed from an upright position, with each repeat becoming faster and more gruelling. We could hear the tortured breathing. And then, after some gentle sideways travel, came the jumps. I have truly never seen the like. As the dancers threw themselves into these giant leaps – each done with individual characteristics, such as bent knees for one, or legs stretched sideways for another – their sense of total release became something palpable.

On and on they jumped, ever higher and higher. It seemed to last forever and by the time it was over, I wanted to be up there with them, embraced by their joie de vivre and the sheer thrill of just being alive. It was a remarkable, and unforgettable, finale.

Parts of Winkler's riotously clever *The Toronto Files* were laugh out loud funny. The witty choreography used bits and pieces of the

five dancers' personal stories to make a statement about the relationship between life and art. The movement was cheekily ironic and totally irreverent in relation to the text.

It began with four dancers sitting on chairs in the four corners of the stage facing each other. They began by telling us things about each other. For example, one person has a supple spine or another can do the splits to the left. As they went along, remarks became more pointed, such as a male dancer having high extensions (that's the compliment, and then the put down)... for a boy.

The fifth dancer was the hysterically comic Chinese-born Kamen Wang. When he entered on little runny ballet steps, Alana Elmer gave the descriptive commentary on what he was doing such as this movement combination is from Mongolia or that one from Tibet. Wang then demonstrated the only three moves he knew out of the 55 moves it takes to create a peacock. When it came to Wang's story about being turned back at the Beijing Airport because he didn't have the proper Olympic only documents, the four dancers waved gently at him, representing his parents as he saw them through the glass.

And so the piece progressed, moving seamlessly from story to story with suitable movement interpolation that either highlighted or commented on the text like a movable Greek chorus. We heard about Whitney Mah's first solo in *Snow White and the Seven TransCarpathians* (the Ukrainian version of the famous fairy tale) or Luke Garwood's description of a 60 year old John Neumeier as Jesus in the *St. Matthew's Passion*. Absolutely side-splitting was Wang trying to teach the other four dancers rudiments of Peking Opera, especially the impossible sideways up/down of the eyes and eyebrows.

The long, extended dance finale incorporated all the fragments of movement we had seen before which collectively was a movement

précis of the entire work. It was an easy lope of physicality yet it challenged the total body.

In rereading the Winkler part of the review just now, I can see *Toronto Files* is a piece that defies the written word. It is impossible to capture in text Winkler's amusing transitions, and how he chose to encase each story in different but astute movement vocabulary. You had to be there.

In the final analysis, Marchand's and Winkler's Europe/Berlin approach turned out to be a divinely rich evening.