

A solo piece, with a double take

AT ONCE TWICE

Choreography by Deborah Hay
Adaptation and solo performances by Christopher House and Joe Moran
At Winchester Street Theatre
In Toronto on Thursday

BY PAULA CITRON

There is a fascinating dance experience currently happening at Winchester Street Theatre, where two very different dancers are performing the same solo by choreographer Deborah Hay. Here's the kicker: The personal aesthetics of Toronto Dance Theatre artistic director Christopher House, and London's Dance Art Foundation artistic director Joe Moran, have radically transformed the Hay solo.

Some background is needed to understand the concert. Hay, 68, is one of the great American dance innovators. During the 1960s, she was a founder of New York's legendary Judson Dance Theatre, which unleashed postmodern dance on the world. This movement, inspired by the experiments of choreographer Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage, broke every known rule and jettisoned every technique of contemporary dance to create total freedom of expression.

In 2009, House and Moran, along with 19 other senior international dance artists, were part of Hay's Solo Performance Commissioning Project (SPCP) that takes place each August in Findhorn, Scotland. During the 11-day intensive, Hay teaches and coaches a new one of her solos.

Each participant signs an agreement that they will engage in daily practice of the solo for three months before it is shown to the public. Hay insists on this so that the dancer has the time to make the solo their own – hence the word “adaptation.”

Another aspect of the SPCP is that each participant raises the money on a grassroots level in order to encourage communities to become involved

in the commissioning of art: The participants are not allowed to use their own funds to get themselves to Findhorn or to pay Hay's commission fee. A combined list of all the sponsors of all the participants, whether government, corporate or individual, is on display wherever the Hay solo is performed.

Hay presents her solo to her SPCP dancers through a series of sequences and images, and her 2009 offering is called *At Once*. Dancers have the liberty of playing with time, direction, and speed – and even music and lighting. The most startling difference between House and Moran is that House's performance, at roughly 37 minutes, is almost 10 minutes longer than Moran's.

It is important to remember that Hay's works run deep, behind deceptively simple movements.

House is a mature artist and in his hands *At Once* is bitter-sweet, melancholy reflection. Moran's interpretation explodes with the energy and insouciance of youth.

Take, for example, this sequence: At one point, the dancer is still. All the movement is in the face. House appears to be fighting back tears as his facial muscles expand and contract. With Moran, it is more of a defiant funny face. House emphasizes the blinking eyes; Moran the tremulous, grimacing lips.

Another repeating motif is one foot gently tapping as arms are raised.

House flexes his knee in the tapping leg, and the movement seems to be a deliberate control of emotion. When he raises his arms, they form a beautiful oval above his head. He is the picture of grace under fire. Moran's foot-tapping embodies impatience. His raised arms, elbows bent, fingers touching, form a line covering his eyes, which has the impact, almost, of a rude gesture.

It is clever having the solos separated by a 15-minute intermission, which gives a chance for House's interpretation to settle in the brain. It also means that Moran's wild, circular opening is more of a genuine surprise.

The minute the concert was over, I wanted the performance to start again so that I could, with the benefit of hindsight, better come to grips with just how individualized the solo has become.

» *At Once Twice* finishes tonight.