

The Utah Review Salt Lake City, Utah

The Utah Review, November 29, 2017

by Les Roka

REPERTORY DANCE THEATRE: TOP BILL (review of Saturday, November 18, 2017 performance)

After its monumental, emotionally incisive *Sanctuary* concert in October, [Repertory Dance Theatre](#) took a different path in the weekend before Thanksgiving by celebrating the homecoming of [William 'Bill' Evans](#), one of the dancers in RDT's first generation of performers in the late 1960s and early- to mid-1970s. The concert struck the right tone for the holiday season with six works that truly thrilled audiences in their accessibility. But, the performances in the [Top Bill](#) concert also matched the exceptional standards of its previous concert, infusing technical precision and excellence with the heartening vibe of deep admiration for a beloved, internationally-known choreographer who always looks forward to revisiting his Utah roots.



Suite Benny. Photo credit, Sharon Kane

The joyful mood was set immediately with the opening work *For Betty*, the earliest of Evans' selections for the concert, which he choreographed in 1970 at the age of 29. Using all three movements of an Antonio Vivaldi string concerto, Evans precisely replicates the angular, muscular rhythms and passages of the Baroque piece with six dancers propelling themselves through the performing space in leaps, jumps and arcs. The work was set as a tribute to Betty Hayes, who taught for nearly a half century in The University of Utah's modern dance program. Like Vivaldi's music, Evans' *For Betty* is a straightforward work of technical bravura – the meat and potatoes of the performing arts form executed perfectly for the audience's satisfaction. The dancers gave it a worthy slam dunk performance.



Alternating Current, Bill Evans, Repertory Dance Theatre, Tyler Orcutt, Dan Higgins. Photo Credit: Sharon Kain.

Likewise, dancers Dan Higgins and Tyler Orcutt executed with electrifying precision *Alternating Current*, a 1982 work Evans cast as a duet and which he frequently performed with Gregg Lizenberry, a former partner who also was among the earliest RDT performers. Focused on convincing movement expressions that represent the alternating stable and volatile cycles of

electric current, the dancers realize an abstract study of relationships in the characters of a flame and a moth.

The music scored by David Sannella and Simon Jeffes sets the appropriate soundscape of droning and humming; interspersed with incidental moments of fluid serenity more often interrupted by tightly wound, tense sounds. It is a complex but realistic statement on the conflicting, simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion and both Higgins and Orcutt captured the effect to its full extent.

While *Alternating Current* represented a new addition to the RDT library, *Tin-Tal* was given its first reconstruction by the company since 1974, when it was last performed and which then featured Linda Smith, the company's co-founder and current artistic director, in the solo role. This time, Ursula Perry performed the solo, accompanied by four other dancers, in a demanding display of technical precision that encompasses patterns of movements often realized as triangles, lines and circular arcs along with highly disciplined footwork and stylized gestures and facial expressions, which really communicate most of the emotional dynamics of the classical Indian dance form upon which the piece is based.



Tin-Tal, Bill Evans, Repertory Dance Theatre. Photo Credit: Sharon Kain,

Inspired by the classical dance tradition of southern India (Bharatanatyam) and the tabla music of Pandit Mahapurush Misra, the most deeply revered musician of this genre, Evans brings his uniquely holistic movement language to bear in the work. The dancers were a marvel of discipline to observe, as they seemed to balance effortlessly the distribution of their body weight and the firm positioning of their limbs. So much of Evans' work conveys a naturally fluid aspect, and it was compelling to watch the dancers use their hands to cut into the lines of movement and let it flow around their bodies. It was pure celebration in multilingual terms.

While the dancers rested and prepared for two outstanding examples of theater-inspired work later in the program, Evans gave evidence of his tap dance skills in *Three Preludes*, a 2009 work he dedicated to his mother, Lila Snape Evans. At 77, Evans seems eternally youthful and is a strong example of how dancing can keep one young, as evidenced in major studies published earlier this year in the *Frontiers in Neuroscience* journal. Evans would be a model case study for any neuroscientist looking to build upon this specific strand of research.

Three Preludes is Evans' master class in body intelligence. But, most enchanting about his performance was how he imbued the music of Gershwin's *Three Preludes*, which the composer first performed in 1926 at a New York City hotel. Evans instinctively recreated the virtuosic effects of Gershwin's music – the Brazilian-influenced syncopated rhythms of the first prelude, the smooth bluesy lullaby of the second and the classic Q&A rendition of the third, alternating between melodic and rhythmic lines that conclude with Gershwin's jazzy flourish.



Three Preludes, Bill Evans, Repertory Dance Theatre. Photo Credit: Sharon Kain.

Evans' lifelong love of jazz is matched by his deep appreciation of classic Hollywood musicals and ballroom dance, elegantly recreated in *Suite Benny*, which featured the entire company. Evans choreographed the work for RDT 30 years ago but decided to reset it in significant ways for the new performance. Here, the tight connection which the current company of dancers has established over the last five years paid a major artistic return on investment.

It was an infectiously fun and impressively executed piece of ensemble work, as the dancers reflected the right mood of the music featuring songs by Edgar Sampson and Louis Prima, in classic recordings by Benny Goodman and his orchestra. Sassy, smart and intimate in harmony and style, it was a rapturous nostalgic tribute to one of America's great dance traditions. And, the solos by Ursula Perry and Lauren Curley capped the piece in the right style and mood.



Suite Benny, Bill Evans, Repertory Dance Theatre. Photo Credit: Sharon Kain.

The full company returned to perform *Crippled Up Blues*, a piece Evans created in 2015 to help celebrate RDT's golden anniversary. A native Utahn, Evans sets the work as the dance version of a historical album celebrating the land of Deseret, accompanied by a suite of songs composed and performed by the locally based [3hattrio](#).

The work puts tremendous demands on the performers, who not only must execute the athletic and acrobatic aspects of the movement which Evans has choreographed but also must convey the story-telling core of the work. Meanwhile, the songs anchor the unique imagery of the place we call Utah and Deseret. There's an exuberant celebration of the land, as marked in the melody of the wind sweeping the high desert, for example. And, then some of the scenes are darker, as the dancers act out songs about the consequences of love and murder or laments about encroaching commercial development and worries about losing cherished legacies. The dancers rise to the challenge in every moment – the best example of it occurring at the end of the piece, an inspired reflection of deep love for Deseret.