

BACK STAGE

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Von Ussar Danceworks

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sagolla

*in association with:
Joyce SoHo at Joyce SoHo, 155
Mercer St., NYC, April 19-21.*

New York City is overflowing with young, magnificently trained dancers, eagerly seeking professional performance opportunities that will allow them to display the results of their years of rigorous study. In today's artistic climate, where the supply of dancers exceeds the demand for terpsichorean services, one is thankful for choreographer **Astrid Von Ussar**. Celebrating the debut of her new company, Von Ussar Danceworks, at Joyce SoHo, she produced six thrill-a-minute dance pieces that allowed a large and diverse assemblage of dancers to show off their technical prowess.

The daring lifts and three distinctly beautiful movement styles put forth by **Sara Segulin**, **Robert Jones**, and **Dominic Guerra** in "Hearts Divided" persuasively evoked the passionate conflicts of a romantic triangle. In "Time Shows No Face," Von Ussar showcased the seasoned skills of veteran dancers **Duane Cyrus**, **Gregory Hinton**, and **Nasha Thomas-Schmitt**. However, had the trio been given more dynamics-driven choreography rather than such technically challenging work, viewers could have more fully appreciated the dancers' masterly abilities to embody a nuanced range of movement qualities.

Sometimes, as in the ensemble pieces "Used, Abused, & Unamused" and "Moments," Von Ussar's choreography started to feel overwhelming in its display of technical virtuosity. Though exhilarating to watch, one wished the constant motion of the dancing would momentarily stop or decelerate in its insistent progression from one action to the next. Grounded in a fiercely energized amalgamation of ballet, jazz, and modern dance vocabulary, with bright brisés frequently punctuating long phrases of sinuous extensions and brash leaps, Von Ussar's dances can suggest dramatic ideas, though the ideas often seem imposed by the performers rather than rooted in the choreography.

It was in the ensemble work "Past/Present" that Von Ussar was most successful in recasting familiar technical maneuvers into a personal vocabulary of expressive movements. And in the evening's finest work, the premiere of "Scratchy Ropes," Von Ussar captivated us by setting aggressive choreographic statements (electrifyingly danced by **Meredith McGovern**) against an absorbing poem (by **Corie Herman**) about coming to terms with the intensity of one's will.