

Black Choreographers Festival review: Intense, varied show

Mary Ellen Hunt

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Gregory Dawson's Dawson Dance performs to music by jazz artist Richard Howell at the Black Choreographers Festival at Laney College February 28 to March 1. Photo: Peter Warren, Black Choreographers Festival

Eclecticism of styles has always marked the Black Choreographers Festival, which offered a program of vastly different works on Friday night at [Laney College](#) in Oakland for the third weekend of its 10th anniversary celebrations.

Of the four pieces that made up a lengthy night, perhaps the most appealing was [Gregory Dawson's](#) "birds eye view," set to music composed and performed live by the Richard Howell Quintet.

Dawson, a [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#) and [Lines Ballet](#) alumnus, works in the contemporary ballet idiom, characterized by balletic grammar mixed with lissome spines, thrusting rib cages and

swerving limbs. Dawson has a snappy vibe, and his confident choreography is at its best when showing off the speedy athleticism and muscularity of his six dancers - [Isaiah Bindel](#), [Jordan Drew](#), [Ilaria Guerra](#), [Byron Roman](#), Oliver Shock and [Jessica Wagner](#).

The moods are mercurial in "birds eye view," which could do with some judicious editing, but Wagner and Bindel are particularly delicious to watch, playing off the energy provided by the musicians with gusto.

[Joanna Haigood](#)'s "Dying While Black and Brown" is set to an original score by [Marcus Shelby](#). The 2011 commission for the [Equal Justice Society](#) offers a raw and ultimately affecting view on African American men trapped in the prison system.

There's a lot of emotion packed into "Dying While Black and Brown," which jams Antoine Hunter, [Rashad Pridgen](#), [Travis Santell Rowland](#) and [Matthew Wickett](#), all clad in orange scrubs, into the confines of a skeletal house frame. The men perch atop it, rattle the metal bars, thread through the space swinging as if on a jungle gym, and seem barely able to break the invisible walls confining them. They clash with each other and bounce off the imaginary walls. Midway through, they shed the prison garb, and intermittently a man breaks free of the confines, but for every moment of escape, there is a pull back into the cage. With Shelby's music sizzling underneath the action, the men sacrifice one of their own and spin the structure around another while balanced precariously on a corner, all building ultimately to a powerful but inconclusive close.

Dance theater in a different vein was represented by [Kendra Kimbrough Barnes](#)' "Clearance: Linking our Passage," a work in progress about the scattering of African Americans across the country throughout history, performed by her eponymous dance ensemble and augmented by several guest artists. At the moment, the piece, which will be performed in the fall in its entirety, looks a little disjointed and perhaps slightly overwhelmed by outsized video projections, although Barnes has sketched out ideas and motifs that hold promise.

The evening closed with Portsha Jefferson's vigorous and colorful, if cartoonish, "Nasyon Dechennen!" (meaning "furious nation" in Haitian Creole), performed by [Rara Tou Limen Haitian Dance Company](#).

Black Choreographers Festival: Continues at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday with [Robert Moses](#)' Kin presenting "Draft" and "BY Series." [ODC Theater](#), 3153 17th Street, S.F. Tickets: \$18-\$30. (415) 863-9834 or www.odcdance.org.

Mary Ellen Hunt is a freelance San Francisco writer. E-mail: datebookletters@sfgchronicle.com