

DANCE

# New-dance showing draws a record crowd to Irvine

It is a tradition of the National Choreographers Initiative – a three-week program supporting the creation of new dance – that at the works-in-progress performance, the audience is encouraged to ask questions of the dancemakers.



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At last week's NCI performance in the Irvine Barclay Theatre, the first question was a commentary. "This is the highlight of the dance scene in Southern California," declared a man sitting toward the front. The crowd agreed with loud applause, provoking pleased smiles from director Molly Lynch and choreographers

Ron De Jesus, Graham Lustig, Charles Moulton and Gina Patterson, all sitting onstage.

Since Lynch began a similar program at Ballet Pacifica back in 1991, I have attended about two-thirds of the showings, and this was undoubtedly the most impressive, on several levels. I don't review the NCI dances because they are not finished works and the performances are not official premieres. Further, the choreographers are always



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LIMBERING UP: Choreographer Ron De Jesus works out as part of the National Choreographers Initiative at UC Irvine.

encouraged to use their three weeks at NCI for experimentation, and they are not trying to come up with a finished product; as such, it's rather remarkable that the showings are such a hit with audiences. About 90 percent of the Barclay's 750 seats were filled, the biggest attendance yet.

What I have noticed is a steady and marked improvement in the quality of the event itself. Its move from South Coast Repertory to the Barclay Theater in 2002 was a step up. The Barclay is a venue well-suited for dance, while SCR, whose directors had been generous supporters of the project, is not.

When the program was part of Ballet Pacifica, Lynch was on the lookout for pieces that she could incorporate into her company's repertory. So even though the program's overall goal was the same as now – to give choreographers a pressure-free environment in which to create – they knew their participation might lead to a commission. I believe the program's total independence of any company has made for more ambitious pieces.

The downside though, as I have written about before, is that the community is unlikely to see the works again. NCI is making an imprint here, though; audiences are growing and local dancers participating. Now that Lynch has been appointed to the faculty at UCI, perhaps some creative partnerships can

emerge.

Lynch initially started the program to benefit younger or mid-career choreographers. That restriction – albeit not rigorously adhered to after the first year or two – has been dropped with NCI and this year's group included veteran choreographers Lustig and Moulton.

Let's not forget the 15 dancers. Ballet Pacifica had some well-schooled and expressive men and women. But now that dancers compete annually for a spot at NCI, the caliber of the dancing is stronger. They came from far-flung companies: National Ballet of Canada, Nashville Ballet, Kansas City Ballet, Richmond Ballet, Louisville Ballet and others. Gina McFadden and Francisco Gella were Ballet Pacifica alumni. Four were current or past students at UCI, a tribute to its dance program.

Leaving the theater, everyone was talking about their favorite piece. I hope I get to see Moulton's "A Rope in the Water" sometime again.

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