

## Dance review: Black Grace's stunning movements prove inspirational

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Duncan Cole

It is extraordinarily difficult to take the deeply rooted performing traditions of an indigenous people and give them a contemporary update without losing something in the translation. Few companies with that ability have appeared on the Pittsburgh Dance Council global initiatives over more than 40 years.

India's Nrityagram immediately pops to mind, a blend of modern and Odissi dance, but it is a struggle to recall any others. That was what made New Zealand's Black Grace such a surprisingly stunning event at the Byham Theater on Saturday night.

There was no doubting this company's Maori and Samoan roots -- body percussion, a weighty use of the feet, an almost spiritual approach to the dance. But in the hands of artistic director, choreographer and visionary Neil Ieremia, those elements, omnipresent throughout the evening, made for a bubbling cauldron of movement that was nothing less than mesmerizing.

The program began with "Pati Pati," a collection of excerpts from several company works that served as an introduction. The audience could immediately grasp the wellspring of rhythms, often in unison, sometimes deliriously and complexly canonic.

(Mr. Ieremia must have a higher-math mind to visualize all of this.) The dancers were ladled into chunky formations, with the movements honed to maximum effect.

But the visceral performance and inspiration came from other sources, which could be seen in the program notes -- children's hand games and child abuse, male stereotyping and historical exploration. Even without that, the movement stood on its own.

A section of "Amata" was based on the patterns found in Samoan fine mats and originally performed by 12 women, which brings us to another extraordinary aspect of Black Grace. The company made its reputation on all-male works, founded in a society that disregarded contemporary dance.

It now is fully integrated and brought a cast of four women and seven men on the ensemble's current North American tour. Much of the movement was unisex, highly physical and aerobic in nature. But these women looked as if they could compete in a triathlon, going toe-to-toe with the men.

However the hourlong "Vaka," translated as "Canoe," gave the best representation of Mr. Ieremia's choreography, both thoughtful and textured.

Inspired by Bill Viola's video installation "The Raft" and the controversial 1898 painting "The Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand" by Louis J. Steele and Charles F. Goldie, it explored the meaning of "Vaka" from a personal and contemporary perspective.

The dancers became a canoe and then the ocean around it with waves of movement. Some were carried aloft by the ensemble. The tightly knit rhythms were always there, accentuated by Bonnie Burrill's lighting, which heightened the muscularity from above or the sides, but then dared to shadow the feet so that the sound took precedence.

"Vaka" drifted in lengthy segments where the dancers turned outward, using confrontation, then turned inward for a projection of individual beliefs. But for all the physicality that had defined it, Black Grace ended on just the right note, a gentle journey of life across the Byham stage, where the performers left behind not only their footsteps, but also vivid memories.