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A many-splendored thing

Carolyn Dorfman's dances about love win hearts

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When love flies in the window, the ability to think straight often slips out the door.

But choreographer Carolyn Dorfman manages to keep her head screwed on straight, however, in the delightful new program titled "In the End It's All About Love," which her Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company, from Union, unveiled Saturday at the South Orange Performing Arts Center.

In this collection of touching and playful dances, Dorfman avoids the pitfalls of romantic cliché. Her works are neither simplistic nor overwrought. They speak directly to the heart, without lapsing into baby talk. They stimulate emotion without wringing us out.

If Dorfman's enthusiasm for sparkling, cherry-colored hula hoops in the premiere "Cercle d'Amour" suggests the folly of someone giddily infatuated, her craft keeps the evening solidly grounded. When Cupids and roses do appear, it is with a certain face-saving irony. This choreographer casts a sympathetic eye on the human condition, especially in the first half of the evening, and clearly she loves props; but in "Cercle d'Amour" she shows us that she loves patterns, space and volumes best of all.

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Garcia waits skittishly for a beau who never comes, while Dumas stretches longing for the one who has departed. Significantly, Dorfman makes a place for both these individuals in the finale of "Facets" rather than impose a false ending where only happy couples may be found.

"Divide and Conquer" is similarly candid, illustrating the case of a typical suburban couple with children. Too harried for romance while the kids are growing up, Dumas and Jon Zimmerman find themselves thrown together again once the kids have left the nest. Their kitchen table becomes a raft on which they cling to one another shipwrecked. Darkness encroaches. Their space grows narrower still, as they step onto a chair and advance together into unknown waters.

After this poignant image, it's time to cut loose. In "Cercle d'Amour," the hula hoops become mesmerizing objects as they spin in circles filled with kinetic energy. They create an environment and define the space. Dancers dive through them, arrange them in patterns and lay them on the floor to make nests and to mark territory. The hoops become extensions of the body.

"Cercle d'Amour" contains its own imaginative vignettes. Mica Bernas is a ringmaster in pointe shoes, putting three men through their paces. Illustrating a poem, two dancers portray lovelorn skyscrapers who dream that their child will not be anchored to the sidewalk. A huge diamond ring appears, and the stage sprouts cartoon characters, while Andy Teirstein's eclectic world beat score keeps pace with its rhythms.

What makes this premiere a hit, however, is its compelling symbolism. Much more than a toy that inspires scampering fun, the hoop suggests the way love shelters people, and the desire that brings a couple together within its mystic enclosure.



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

The Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company premiering "Cercle d'Amour," which captures the folly of infatuation, in the program "In the End It's All About Love," performed Saturday at the South Orange Performing Arts Center.

The program opens with "Facets," a sampler mining old dances for their sentiment. Bodies pile up and roll off each other in "Pastorale Pause," and revolving platforms change our perspective, creating a dynamic architectural space. Dancer Jacqueline Dumas supplies a human focus. A solitary figure, she attaches herself to one couple after another, but ultimately finds community in a circle of women.

Her search anticipates the excerpts from "Living Room Music" and "Love Suite Love," which also feature lonely hearts. Marielis