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## American Stories

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Saturday I was able to catch Spectrum Dance Theater's American Stories. A program that contained Artistic Director Donald Byrd's *Living in East Podunk* and *Interrupted Narratives/WAR*. The unifying theme being the examination of facets of contemporary American life.

*Living in East Podunk* was performed by guest artists, Koresh Dance Company. The piece, premiered in 2003, is an exploration of human relationships in what is presumably a nondescript small town. The work opens with the dancers presenting themselves in a line at the forefront of the stage. A series of small vignettes unfold as each dancer engages in small talk, comradery, sex, and hostility with other members of the line. The men wear ragtag vests and the women comely dresses. As the piece progresses the story alternates between large social groups and the personal narratives of each of the dancers. After interludes of duets and trios, the ensemble pieces begin to act as commentary on the individual actions of the characters. A cause and effect relationship develops. Generally, the private sexual activities of the individuals ends in a public humility.

The Koresh Dance Company was able to handle Byrd's demanding choreography with finesse and acumen. Much of the vocabulary rests in repetition of a type of fantasy sign language, found throughout Donald Byrd's pieces. This incorporated mime requires an acute sense of theater and characterization – otherwise the result is an awkward pantomime. Several of the interludes featured amazing virtuosity from the company. The end result was a piece that managed to be provocative, entertaining, sexy, and disturbing all at once.

This was followed by Byrd's latest creation, *Interrupted Narratives/WAR*, performed by Spectrum Dance Theater. I can't say that I enjoyed this piece, but there is much I admired in it. A full-length work, I believe it ran at about 1 hr. 10 min. on Saturday, *Interrupted Narratives/WAR* is an attempt to address our perceptions and their effects of the current war in Iraq. The piece opened with Peter de Grasse reading the details of a soldier's death during service. He places the piece of paper on the stage. He begins reading from another sheet, etc., etc. This theme is kept up throughout the performance. At times the narratives are voiced by the dancers, other times it is mixed with the music. Sometimes it is one narrative clearly being told, and many of the times it is countless stories being related at once. All of the soldiers' names and deaths are real and were taken from stories in the Seattle Post Intelligencer and iCasualties.org. The set design, costuming, and lighting add to the sobering effects of the subject matter. The backdrop is a sheet of shipping palettes, the costumes are of the camels and taupes of military desert gear, and the lighting is almost always focused from directly above the dancers. The musical accompaniment consisted of droning electronic percussion pieces and contemporary arabic dance music piped out to the audience at a

slightly louder than comfortable volume – hence drowning out the slew of names and dates. I couldn't help but consider the change in the use of "oriental" music from the early 20th Century to today.

If you strip away all these elements and are left with just the dance, the piece is less about the specifics of today and a more general approach to the themes of loss and grief. When the company is performing together, they slowly build themselves into a frenzy of outrage with dancers removing themselves to mourn at the back of the stage. The partnering is aggressive and stunning. Interestingly, I think this is the least narrative and most abstract of Byrd's creations in the last few years. I would have preferred that the consistent reminders that this was about Iraq have been tempered. Half way through the performance it became irritating and desensitized the sobriety of the message. But maybe that was the point. I feel the same way about the news coverage and polemically charged debates, as well. In all, I admire anyone's attempt to comprehend and explore the ramifications of war in art. And although this wasn't the piece I wanted it to be, I don't regret having attended.