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‘By the Inch’ at the American Dance Institute is direct, transcendent and entrancing

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Tiffanie Carson, photo by Brianne Bland

The directness of Christopher K. Morgan’s work hooks you from the first move. The transcendence of it keeps you hooked, even after the last moves are over.

It’s an unusual thing in dance to experience a fast-paced kinetic charge that has emotional content, too. This was the power of Morgan’s “By the Inch,” a program of four extraordinary works at American Dance Institute this weekend. The performances flew by — the program lasted scarcely longer than an hour, including an intermission — and left you rather breathless. That’s a tribute to the excellent dancers, all of whom (Morgan included) have a rolling, luxurious and large-scale quality of movement. But it was Morgan’s talent for combining moves into great waves of corporeal expression at once primal and poetic that made you forget about less significant things like exhaling.

The roller-coaster ride launched without delay in the first work, “In the Cold Room,” a world premiere featuring Giselle Alvarez (fondly remembered from the Washington Ballet’s Studio Company), Tiffanie Carson and Amanda Engelhardt. Morgan didn’t waste them on the mundane. A circling, spiraling current spun through them, like some mystical cyclone; they arced and swooped as if something unseen were in control, whipping them off-axis, pushing them to the very edge of their ability to stay upright. Their unease was nameless and big, and it held the imagination.

Over in the corner, a musician named Wytold was whipping up his own windstorm on an electric cello. Live music was a classy touch, and a mark of Morgan’s attention to detail, which also was clear in the sensitive lighting by Jason Wells. Wytold brought shifting emotional tones into the second world premiere, “Bruised,” a testosterone-fueled duet for Washington Ballet members Corey Landolt and Andile Ndlovu. Tenderness crept in near the end — each man tried to lay his head on the other’s shoulder — but was abruptly cut short. Here, as in “In the Cold Room” and in a solo for Carson, “Selling Out,” the dancers often seemed at war with themselves. Established rhythms were interrupted by sudden impulses that wrenched their bodies into jagged, off-kilter shapes.

Morgan doesn’t seem interested in folks with seamless personalities and no drama. His autobiographical 2004 solo, “The Measure of a Man,” which capped the evening, provided a clue as to why. There are so many stories inside a fractured person — one who is scarred, with the pain still fresh, and who is tough enough to revisit it. Morgan’s exploration of varieties of manhood — the cheesy pickup artist (“Do you believe in love at first sight, or should I walk by again?”), the office drone, the ballet prince and the majestic queen in pleather hot pants — was a hilarious suite of spot-on impressions. It was also a searing portrait of someone on the outside looking in. But as his other works showed, belonging to a group is overrated. Conformity is boring. Messy individuality is so much more interesting.