



## Dance Now! Ensemble review

To honor Cupid and his shenanigans in advance of Valentine's Day, the Dance Now! Ensemble (DNE) presented "Dances in the Key of Love," a many-splendored evening of modern dance choreographed by company founders Hannah Baumgarten and Diego Salterini, at the Byron Carlyle Theatre in North Miami Beach on February 7 and 8. Dance veterans Salterini and Baumgarten – he an Italian native schooled in the European tradition, she a Californian who graduated from Juilliard – opened Act One with a sweet if timid piece choreographed by the company's artistic advisor, industry veteran Michael Uthoff. Set to a beautifully haunting Argentine folk song, "El árbol del olvido" (The tree of forgetfulness), in a recording by deceased Chilean artist and political activist Víctor Jara, the piece conveyed through the delicate moves of the couple a longing and a melancholy characteristic of anyone who's been in love. No longer twentysomething dancers hungry to show off their skills, the tall lean Baumgarten and the graceful, meticulous Salterini bounced off each other in a complicit dialogue that made this piece a paean to their long lasting collaboration. In "Brothers," the second piece of Act One's "Love Duet Suite", company dancers Todd Grace and Pioneer Winter demonstrated brotherly love in a vibrant choreography by Salterini and Baumgarten. Poignant, tender and even funny at times, Grace and Winter paid tribute to an underrepresented manifestation of love with the aid of two chairs. One moment, the chairs could be just that, chairs, as in the beginning of the piece, when each dancer faced the audience and their expressions and bodies engaged in a fluid dialogue. Grace and Winter executed their moves holding on to the chairs, reclining on them, sometimes even playing with them in a Chaplinesque way, always in an agile and flexible manner that put forth the athletic components that can be a part of modern dance. Love between two women was the subject of "Due," choreographed by Salterini. But which women? The older and the younger woman? Lovers? Girlfriends? Sisters in crime? Baumgarten and U.S. Virgin Islands'-born and Broward-raised LaVonna Anthony adroitly expressed this rollercoaster of emotions. Their movements incorporated the simple holding of hands, gazing, walking away, or towards one another, hinting at a love that had been lost, but then found its way again. In "Tree of Knowledge," choreographed by Baumgarten, a chiseled and scantily clad Todd Grace portrayed a sensual, postmodern Adam to DNE newcomer Maddelyn Hageman's Eve. The first act ended with "I was about... 13 years old", an ensemble piece set to music by Kate Bush where Anthony, Grace, Hageman, Winter and Kristine Winner brought to life joyously and colorfully the bonds of love that can link friends or relatives in a communal, tribal, ancestral way. The second act opened with the Miami Gay Men's Chorus chamber ensemble, Insignia, singing "Dirait-on" (a poem-turned-folksong written in French by German Rainer Maria Rilke) and the famous Temptations' soul classic from the 1960s "The Way You Do the Things You Do," setting the mood for "Five Dresses," an autobiographical series of five solo pieces choreographed by Baumgarten that gave the dancers a chance to represent the love of self. The coquettish Kristine Winner in a pearly dress brought out the "Oh" in George Gershwin's song "Oh!" Perhaps the evening's only misfire came with the following piece, "Don't Look Back," as guest dancer Algeria Bridges took the title a bit too literally. The problem here was not Bridges' performance, but the constraint of never looking at the audience as if she were Lot's wife about to turn into a pillar of salt. With her face hidden, the dancer's shoulder blades and the backs of her arms simply could not express enough emotion to keep the audience engaged. Luckily, in the following solo "Let It Go," guest artist Ana Bolt delivered explosive expressivity with body and face, emitting sighs that overpowered through the



music and sliced through the theater. LaVonna Anthony and Maddelyn Hageman rounded out the series with strong performances in “There I Am Here” and “Unburden.” Lights and music here were so much more than backgrounds; they were perfect mood rings, if you wish, of the temperaments these women were representing on stage. The show closed with love of family and country in a series of short pieces choreographed by Salterini and inspired by his family (his mother passed away last year) and the land of his ancestors, Italy. The most awesome of these was “Terra Mia”, as Pioneer Winter’s handsome Renaissance-style face and wavy long hair channeled Salterini’s emotions, with the dancer’s expressions never a step ahead or behind of his body’s reactions. The punches life throws, the unavoidable pangs of pain that accompany loss, the discovery of beauty in every day’s simplicity, Winter knew how to project these aspects in a sensitive way, folding or unfolding his body, rising or laying down, in an exquisite exercise of body and mind synch. With few props, plenty of color and, above all, a delicious and deliriously varied soundtrack to accompany such diverse choreographies, Dance Now! Ensemble’s “Dances in the Key of Love” did what love does: it was unpredictable, sometimes messy, sometimes melodramatic but, in the end, always worth the risk. For more information on the Dance Now! Ensemble, visit [www.dancenowmiami.org](http://www.dancenowmiami.org)