

DATEBOOK

Quadruple the pleasure, quadruple the dancing fun

By Rachel Howard
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Talent: You've got it or you don't. And from the start of Benjamin Levy's precocious choreographic career, it's been clear this guy has serious gifts.

Levy's five-member LEVYdance debuted in 2003 and quickly generated a buzz on both coasts with engagements in New York and Washington, D.C. But his troupe is based here in San Francisco, and it was spellbinding Friday night during the first of two programs designed to bring notable California dance companies to fresh audiences.

The slate, dubbed "Four on the Floor," is produced by the new California Regional Dance Touring Project, and it travels to Santa Barbara and San Diego in April. Friday's opening double bill also featured the lush movement and un-

The performers are a youthful but steely bunch who bring muscled thighs and baby faces into contrast.

abashed emotionalism of Jean Isaacs' San Diego Dance Theater. But it was two works by Levy that had the crowd at ODC Theater on its feet.

What makes the company's performances so attractive? First, the performers are a youthful but steely bunch who bring muscled thighs and baby faces into eye-catching contrast. Second is an unmistakable style that takes Martha Graham training and updates it for

a technological era. Limbs shoot like vectors. Joints isolate and twist like complicated machinery. Bodies flow over one another like electrical currents.

Then there's Levy's sure sense of theatrical tension, well highlighted in two pieces from the company's December home season. "Hiding Pattern" is the stronger. Two space-age stunts face off with Christopher Hojin Lee, who dives into a handstand between Lauren Slater's split legs before she pins him with a backbend as Matthew Johnson's electronic score pulses. Doe-eyed Cambria Gareli is a slightly gentler dominatrix, but Lee's chances for escape are nil as the two women join forces in a kinetically entangled final trio.

"That Four Letter Word..." is newer and the structure bumpier, but it shows Levy's comic side and

► LEVY: Page D5

San Francisco Chronicle D5

LEVYdance troupe moves to the pulse of technology

► LEVY
From Page D1

promises fresh directions to come. The tour de force here is a duet for Levy and spitter Brooke Gessay. This is one wild tug-of-war, as he buries his head in her ample bosom like a battering ram pushing at a door.

Levy also dances with the Joe Goode Performance Group, and the sections that follow show hints of Goode's campy influence. Dancers blow up balloons, caressing themselves with the escaping air. The antics culminate with a crowded tango for five. For a rainy winter night, the heat was palpable.

The remaining companies were no small potatoes, either. Isaacs, now the head of San Diego Dance Theater, made a welcome return to the Bay Area with 2005's "Suite Jeff," a tribute to departed pop singer Jeff Buckley. A commanding Faith Jensen-Ismay nuzzled John Diaz to the song "Lilac Wine," while Liv Isaacs-Nollet shared a duet of wearing vulnerability with Veronica Martin-Lamin to the closing "Hallelujah." "Hunters," from 2004, was less successful, opening with an intriguing archery match between a fanlike Diaz and Victor Alonso. The second section, to music by Steve Reich, was just minimalist ensemble noodling.

Saturday's duo of companies was utterly crowd-pleasing. Stephanie Gilliland's TONGUE has an unmistakable Los Angeles aesthetic—



ELIZABETH GRAY

part pole-dance, part stunt show. Apparently, she's investigated every last way to make a dancer slam on one knee. "Found Objects," set to twangy rock by 16 Horsepower, was more focused and less pretentious than other Gilliland works seen in San Francisco over the last year.

Also hailing from southern California, Santa Barbara Dance Theater brought New York choreographer Doug Elkin's clever "Love Is Short and Forgetting So Long." Elkin is a cultural omnivore, mixing

ballet and break dancing, Bjork and Missy Elliot. Petite powerhouse Morgan Allen was especially fabulous, whether lip-synching to Sheryl Crow or pirouetting to Rufus Wainwright. But artistic director Jerry Pearson's soul-soothing "Strange Boat," set to Van Morrison, highlighted the troupe's gentle group spirit. This is a highly likable collection of dances that should get out of Santa Barbara more often.

In its first year out, this new touring project batted four for four.

LEVYdance
troupe
performed in
"Four on the
Floor," a
program that
brings
California
dance
companies to
fresh
audiences.