

STAGE



ERICA FERIOZZI AND BRION MCCARTHY

Members of the Full Circle Dance Company dare to go *B.A.R.E.*

Full Circle Dance Company

15-member troupe explores the fraught topic of body image in *B.A.R.E.: Bodies, Attitudes, Reflections, EXPOSED*



By [Andrea Appleton](#)

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B.A.R.E.: Bodies, Attitudes, Reflections, EXPOSED

[Nov. 4-5 at 7:30 p.m. at the Baltimore Museum of Art.](#)

For more information, visit fullcircledance.webs.com.

All 15 members of the Full Circle Dance Company have enviable bodies. They vary in the details—height, proportion, age, skin tone. Some are more flexible, others more muscular. But all are paragons of the physical form, capable of feats that make the rest of us seem lead-footed. It’s hard to imagine a group of people less likely to suffer from insecurities about appearance. Yet the company (which is, barring one member, entirely female) recently discovered that when it comes to body image, they are all too human.

Their anxieties came to light in the process of creating a project titled *B.A.R.E.: Bodies, Attitudes, Reflections, EXPOSED*, a collection of seven original choreographed pieces that will debut this week at the Baltimore Museum of Art. As is Full Circle’s habit, the company has been preparing for this performance for a year,

and it revolves around just one theme: body image. (Past themes include race, religion, water, the unconscious, and motherhood.) Once a topic is chosen, the creative process begins. The choreographers conduct research—one looked at advertising in this case—and often hold public forums inviting the community to contribute to the conversation around a given theme. But the free-form, often emotional discussions the dancers have with one another are central to the projects.

“There have always been tears—it creates better work.” says Donna Jacobs, Full Circle’s artistic director. “It creates better work. We had this conversation and several of them said, ‘I feel fat with all of you because you’re so beautiful.’ . . . For us, there’s some secrecy about it. It’s almost as if you’re an ingrate.”

Dancers who happen to be taking a break nearby, in the Morton Street Dance Center in Hampden’s Meadow Mill building, nod in recognition. “My friends are actually annoyed we’re doing this,” says Hope Byers, who choreographed a piece for the show. “They think we couldn’t possibly have body image problems.”

The intent of the project, the choreographers say, is to illuminate universals, not insecurities that are specific to dancers. “We really strived to make this overall statement that we’re in this boat together,” says Allison Powell, another of the choreographers. “It’s all perspective.” She was inspired by PostSecret, the national community art project. Participants mail in their secrets on a postcard, anonymously, and, the hope is, find some solace as a result. In preparation for her piece, Powell created a “secret box” and solicited secrets about body image from the public, but her fellow dancers provided many of the responses. They make for a disheartening read.

“I liked my body better when I was anorexic,” reads one. “I lipoed my love-handles at 23,” another says. A postcard that was sent in reads: “I think that I am amazing and wonderful. I am capable, intelligent, creative and caring. I really like myself and don’t feel inadequate . . . until I see a Victoria’s Secret commercial and feel like I’m all wrong.”

Powell used the secrets in her choreography in several different ways. “I’d take an image and let it sink into my body and have the movements come out of that,” she says. The result is somewhat abstract; a comment about a round belly might result in a curving movement, for example. The dancers themselves—in this piece, only three—were also asked to interpret a particular secret, and Powell then modified their movements. A rehearsal this summer, before the piece was fully realized, was already powerful. Three women stood, staring at the audience, rubbing their faces and ears, massaging their necks and torsos in unison, as atmospheric music rolled in like an approaching train. The performance had a mesmerizing, precise quality, including sharp exhalations and slow movements of the eyes, evoking the self-conscious edge insecurities can produce.

“The Beauty Industries’ Insanity,” choreographed by Jennifer Seye, takes a more literal, brassy approach. In her piece, Seye, a tall blonde who towers above the rest of the company, rails against the concept of “one size fits all.” She built a full set for the piece, and at first, the viewers will only see the dancers’ feet as they struggle behind dressing room curtains to put on clothing that does not fit them. A voice-over by humorist Erma Bombeck opens: “I am of the firm opinion that if this is allowed to continue, ‘one size fits all’ will virtually annihilate anyone over 100 pounds,” she says, to canned laughter. The dancers eventually emerge from the dressing room and do a series of vampy, tongue-in-cheek poses and butt shakes for the audience. But the humorous tone gradually transitions to something darker, until the performers begin to call out specific, clearly personal, beliefs about themselves as they clutch at their bodies: “I’m so old! I hate it!” yells one. “I have no boobs! I look like a boy!” cries another. By the end, they are on the ground, crawling.

Several other pieces take on the role of the woman’s body over time. Hope Byers was inspired by the story of Saartjie Baartman, who in the early 19th century was tricked into traveling to Europe from her native Africa. Once there, she was put on display. Europeans ogled at her large buttocks and unusually long labia. Known as the Hottentot Venus, her genitalia were pickled and put on display after death. “In life and death, she was a woman on display,” Byers says. “I found her story intriguing.”

One section of Byers’ three-part piece—the one devoted to the past—is about Baartman. The others take on the present—a Victoria’s Secret fashion show—and the future—when women, Byers theorizes, will be manufactured like cars.

But several of the pieces, though informed by the theme, are less literal. Ohio University dance professor Travis Gatling, who has collaborated with Full Circle for a decade, came in as a guest choreographer for the project. An energetic man with a warm, teasing manner, he created his piece in just days. In one particularly powerful section, nearly the whole company is onstage, divided into two brigade-like groups. As one group moves in rapid unison—a series of turns, say, with arms overhead—the other moves together more subtly: an exaggerated pulse that ripples through the torso, as if from exhaustion after a long run. Then the groups switch roles. The effect is an ebb and flow, with energy rushing from one side of the stage to the other, like a wave gathering strength before crashing. In another section, four dancers scoot rapidly across the floor on their rears and then, in a gesture that requires tremendous strength, execute a series of side kicks from the ground, as though injured but struggling to gain altitude.

Because of time constraints and Gatling’s intuitive style, the details of the piece—which hand is on top when they are crossed, whether or not a toe touches the ground—take shape partly through questions from the performers. “Are we looking at each other?”

asks one of the dancers during a rehearsal. “Why not?” Gatling replies. “Go ahead and look at each other.”

Gatling describes his piece as a “celebration of the body’s potential,” but if you weren’t looking for it, you wouldn’t know he was exploring body image. Abstract works can be more difficult for inexperienced audiences to latch onto, Donna Jacobs says, so she is pleased that the program includes both abstract and literal pieces. Jacobs’ own piece, though inspired by the trials that women around the world have experienced, particularly in the sphere of sexual violence, is also abstract.

“If we were to play the work in slow motion and explain it as we go along, you would be able to understand the relationship of the precise movement to the theme,” she says. “But what some viewers will see is just a beautiful dance.” And that, thematic concerns aside, they will.

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