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Center Dance Ensemble: 'Journey's of the Heart'

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There is something essentially absurd about a 21st century urban choreographer staging a dance about quaint 19th century pastoral "simple folk." It just doesn't ring true.

That is the primary problem with Frances Smith Cohen's *Quilters*, which recycles all the noble-minded clichés about pioneer life from *Oklahoma* and *Appalachian Spring*. We've seen these sincere people before, rocking their babies cradled in their arms or doing that stylized modern-dance square dance.

Center Dance Ensemble has opened its season with a re-edited and shortened version of Cohen's 2005 *Quilters* and filled the evening out with several shorter pieces, including several presented by guest performers.

While there were many very fine moments - a twist here, a twirl there and some nice turns by individual dancers - overall, the program was a long sit.

The evening, called "Journeys of the Heart," opened with a new abstract dance by Cohen called *First Dance*.

Mid-level modern dance in America seems to have been caught in the 1960s: earnest and idealistic, performed before an audience of 20 or 25 in a coffee house in Greenwich Village.

One can't help but think of Jules Feiffer's slender waif in black leotard announcing "a dance to spring!"

The art form has ossified into a rather limited series of conventionalized gestures and posturings, repeated over and over, and with a surprising lack of joy in physical movement, but rather with a sodden sense of artistic self-importance.

This was especially evident in the first guest group, Movement Source Dance Company, whose *I to the Third Power* epitomizes the problem. Not a single original movement and all danced to really bad poetry: "I am in a box containing two bodies that cannot touch." It might as well have been mime.

Transit, by the Scottsdale Community College Instinct Dancecorps had the virtue of enthusiasm, its young student dancers seemed to enjoy themselves, giving some life to a scenario that didn't really go anywhere.

The high point of the first half was *In the Space Provided* by Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, a piece of considerable humor, originality, some really graceful dancing and enough dialog for it to qualify more as a performance piece than a dance. But it gave a real lift to the program.

The main piece, however, was *Quilters*, and you can get the drift from the section titles: *Memories, The Journey Begins: Wheels, The Campfire Duet, The Quilting Party, My Baby is Gone, Herd A'Passin', Lord I'm Tired* and *Oregon at Last!*

The narration, by "cowgirl poet" Dee Strickland Smith, performing live with a band, was just as conventional as the choreography, and occasionally bogged down with lines such as: "As I start to slice the bacon, I realized I'd been forsaken."

In an era when Mark Morris, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp or Pina Bausch can be seen in person or on PBS by most Americans, this old-hat choreography needs a bit of freshening up.

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