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Nagrin's works speak strongly now, thanks to O'Hara interpretation

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 SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

For one who remembers Daniel Nagrin and his groundbreaking choreography and performances, it is a treat to see someone bringing his work to today's audiences.

Shane O'Hara, coordinator of the dance program at James Madison University, is doing just that, and Saturday night at the Grace Street Theater, he delighted his audience with a presentation of six of Nagrin's solo works.

Opening with two pieces from the 1940s, O'Hara immediately showed that his execution of Nagrin's choreography is as near perfection as can be expected. "Strange Hero" gave him a chance to swagger and strut as a "cool cat" gangster who moves through life killing with no remorse. His movements are sometimes even robotic in the preciseness of each gesture, down to his dying moment when he salutes his murderer before checking out.

"Man of Action" develops the character of the urban man who rushes through life trying to be in two places at one time. O'Hara's comic flair and marvelously expressive face help put this piece across.

"Indeterminate Figure" and "Someone," both from the 1950s, offer interpretations that are more ambiguous and abstract. Sounds play an important part in the first of these pieces, beginning with bombs dropping and moving on through daily

sounds of rain, telephones and even one's heartbeat. Here O'Hara displays his perfect sense of timing, reacting to every sound right on cue. Each gesture, expression and movement is precise and powerful.

"Wordgame, A Cartoon" and "Path" show Nagrin's daring to interpret the mood of the 1960s as he saw it. "Wordgame" is part of his Peloponnesian War Concert created during the Vietnam War. Here he demonstrates the phoniness and manipulative schemes of a smooth talker as he tries to impose his beliefs on others. This is made more effective by O'Hara's very expressive face and by repetitive choreography.

"Path" is performed in silence as O'Hara, carrying a long two-by-four, moves diagonally across stage, repeating over and over the same pattern of steps. There was not a sound from the audience as this simplistic piece mesmerized them. Could it be that the path of life is one long repetition as we move through our days?

After the performance, O'Hara, joined by his lighting director, Paul D. Jackson, answered questions on the works and on what it has been like to work with Nagrin in re-creating his choreography that was ahead of its time. It is evident that O'Hara has lovingly and meticulously reconstructed these pieces and is proving to his audiences that Nagrin's decades of experimental choreography have produced works that are applicable in today's world.

The program was presented by the department of choreography and performance at Virginia Commonwealth University.

DANCE REVIEW