

Miller troupe explores man's place

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By Hedy Weiss Dance Critic

We are in a time of tsunamis and hurricanes, of fires and floods — a moment in which the mass displacement of human life serves as a reminder of just how small we humans are in relation to the vast powers of nature.

In "Landing/Place," her fascinating new multimedia dance work, the veteran African-American choreographer-director Bebe Miller and her team of collaborators do a remarkable job of capturing both the wonder and the terror of that realization. And in ways that are anything but literal, they examine everything from our relationship to home and our place in the universe to our attempts to connect with other cultures as well as with the universe beyond.

Miller's 70-minute piece — which will receive the last of just three Chicago performances tonight at the Dance Center of Columbia College, where it is being co-presented with the Museum of Contemporary Art — features some exquisite dancing by the five members of the Bebe Miller Company, all of whom are highly individualistic yet also powerfully connected to each other. But it is the haunting juxtaposition of these dancers with a couple of toy-size wooden cabins, as well as with the more technologically driven elements of light, sound, video and digitized "motion-capture" (which evokes the movement of the human body in what is a kind of electronic imaging), that is most crucial.

Scale is of the essence here. So is whimsy and delight and a sense of awe. An opening video projects the image of a plaid window curtain blowing in a breeze. It could be the window of a shack in the Deep South. And the fact that Miller's company is comprised of two black men (Darrell Jones and David Thomson) and three white women (Kathleen Fisher, Angie Hauser and Kathleen Hermesdorf) — and that this racial mix takes on subtle and interesting overtones in the often abstract storytelling — seems far from incidental.

This intimate if sometimes strange world soon opens up to a sense of the wider universe, as constellations streak through the sky in electronic projections that proceed to morph into the outlines of human bodies. Later the heavens will open up as the dancers arch their backs and gaze at what might be asteroids or flashes of lightning or some cosmic cataclysm. And sometimes the relationship between the dancer and the world is more lighthearted, as when a man looks at video of a tree-lined open road and then playfully "walks into" the landscape.

Besides scale, there is gesture, and quirky but lovely movement — as when two girls are "planted" in headstands like trees, or when a young man catches the foot of a girl in arabesque and patiently waits for the balance to shift. In these ways, Miller suggests a sense of the fragility of life and human connection.

Sitting at the side of the stage throughout the performance is Albert Mathias, whose soundscaping and scoring are intrinsic to the piece; using everything from opera to world beat to the spoken word in several languages, he creates much of its mood and global aura. And the sound is beautifully integrated with the sophisticated and lyrical animation by Vita Berezina-Blackburn, the lush video by Maya Ciarrocchi, the masterful lighting by Michael Mazzola and the character-defining costumes that are mostly off-the-rack but mix a sense of the street-wise with the ethnically and historically layered.

As "Landing/Place" ends, a great flock of white birds streaks across the sky, giving the piece a final breathless quality, even as the dancers settle into a state of temporary rest. A fine metaphor for our existence.