

Dance Review: Vermont dance, varied and excellent

By [Jim Lowe](#)

Staff Writer

Vermont's professional dance community came together this weekend for the first time in recent memory, and the result was absolutely fascinating.

DanceFest Vermont opened Friday at the Barre Opera House with six very different works by five of the state's top choreographers.

On Saturday, another group of fine choreographers presented their work at Stowe's Spruce Peak Performing Arts Center, closing this — hopefully annual — event.

What proved particularly intriguing at Friday's Barre Opera House performance was the variety. What was consistent was the high quality of the dancing — nearly all by Vermont artists.

Deeply touching was Burlington choreographer Toby McNutt's "One, Two," duo and solo. Initially McNutt, who dances with crutches, and Marly Speiser-Schneider dance in parallels, sometimes separating — but never far. The purpose may have been to bring together a dancer with a disability and one without, but the result was much deeper, much more — personally but not sexually — intimate.

Although a bit anticlimactic after the deeply emotional first part, the second had McNutt, without music, dancing more gymnastically yet always gracefully. With crutches, without, using them as tools or even props, McNutt danced across the floor. It was unexpected — and beautiful.

Mixing humor and depth was Middlebury dancer-choreographer Patty Smith's "Tiny Divas: Lotte Lenya." The oldest dancer of the evening, Smith proved a sultry, and somewhat gymnastic femme fatale as she glided around the stage to the dark music of Kurt Weill's "The Threepenny Opera."

It was more intimate as she interacted with a wooden chair to the music of Brahms, before returning to the sultry Weill. It was delicious.

Real variety was offered by Pawlet choreographer and dancer Erika

Lawlor Schmidt, the festival's founder and director. She opened the show in her haunting "Skin," in which she is engulfed in the costume of a white crow-like creature.

To hauntingly quiet electronic music by the choreographer's husband Gary Schmidt, the creature sheds her skin, emerging and coming to life — to sparkling music — as a bewildered human being.

Schmidt's much lighter "One blink of an eye to being fully awake" closed the evening. To Gary Schmidt's electronic score, including a few Louis Armstrong vocal lines, "The Satchmo Project," the five excellent dancers pranced, writhed, acted and interacted giving it the feeling of professional modern dancers at "American Bandstand."

Joining Erika Schmidt were Michael D. Gonzalez, Zoe Hilliard, Maya Kraus, Meredith Mills and Candace Dick. It was delightful and impressive.

Improvisation and fine ensemble dancing mixed in Willow Wonder's light and entertaining "Crate." With only occasional verbal ejaculations and complete sentences for accompaniment, Avi Waring, Bridget Wheeler, Natalie Wheeler and Christine Harris — and four plastic milk crates — danced, and intertwined gymnastically and artfully. There were some particularly intimate moments between the Wheeler sisters, but mostly it was great fun.



Friday's performances at the Barre Opera House are proof that Vermont has an excellent professional dance community. Let's hope it stays out of hiding.