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'Hands' a zeitgeist of fear and trembling

By Sid Smith and Tribune Arts Critic
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In biblical tradition, the laying of hands evokes such benign forces as blessing and healing.

But in "Laying of Hands," from Margaret Morris Dance, the landscape is one of angst, feral animosity and apocalypse. This may not be the way the world ends, necessarily, but it is where the world has brought itself, according to choreographer Morris' grim vision: lost, angry and void of hope.

A word about the space of this engagement. The Galaxie, a performance gallery at 2603 W. Barry Ave., is tucked away in a bland warehouse neighborhood less than a mile geographically from the Belmont Avenue police complex, and a universe removed in other respects. Its spacious back room, with a high, vaulted wooden ceiling, hosts a gigantic playing area and an atmosphere recalling early Soho. Most of the 60 seats at Friday's performance were occupied.

The bleakness in "Laying of Hands," meanwhile, would be just melodrama if Morris weren't such a vibrant and promising choreographer.

There are flaws, most of them youthful ones. But Morris has an edgy, inventive approach to movement that seems more an attack than a style. Classically abstract at its base, her choreography slyly incorporates martial arts, street fighting and id-like frenzy, along with absurdist, theatrical agony. A woman sits amid one of the abstract, tree-like sculptures, slapping herself and pinching her face as if clawing at imaginary bugs.

Elsewhere, spasmodic, individual arias evoking torment occasionally segue into brief, choral interludes for all five dancers, including one dramatic march, so unrelenting that when one of the women shrieks and falls, you believe there's been an accident.

That's cagey stuff, especially because Morris isn't just riffing but eloquently exploring a zeitgeist of fear and trembling. This piece (scored wondrously by Lloyd Broadnax King and Johnse Holt) seems about a world all too steeped in war and terror, not to mention disconnect and portents of cataclysmic doom. These are not disjointed images, either. There are movement motifs, constructs introduced early and repeated later in the 65-minute piece.

The work is too long, and an extended duet, little more than indulgent theater, now provides an unsatisfying finale. But self-indulgence is a trademark of youth, and Morris is a young dancer-choreographer employing her gifted movement for burning commentary.

"Laying of Hands" plays through Sunday at the Galaxie, 2603 W. Barry St. For tickets: 773-321-2006.

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