



ARTS

[menu](#)

New American Talent / Dance

Not everyone agreed with the clear winner in Ballet Austin's competition this year, and enough with the tweets

Review by Jonelle Seitz



James Gregg's "The Space Between"

Dell Hall at the Long Center, 701 W. Riverside

March 29

Choreography competitions like Ballet Austin's biennial *New American Talent/Dance* are two-headed beasts. There's no question that they enable choreographers to gain recognition and experience working with versatile, cohesive groups of dancers, and allowing local audiences to pick winners and losers is a surefire way to engage them. But when dances are commissioned specifically for competition, it stands to follow that some choreographers will make dances for the explicit purpose of winning votes, despite the fact that pandering to the committee is not the modus operandi of most serious choreographers. Worse, audience members whose points of view don't align with the "correct" ones implied by competition results can feel alienated or devalued.

James Gregg's flashy, energetic "The Space Between" won the audience award for each of the three performances; surprisingly, it was the also the favorite of the jurors: Houston dance journalist Nancy Wozny, Richmond Ballet Artistic Director Stoner Winslett, and Dallas arts programmer Charles Santos. According to Gregg in a video clip before the performance, the piece was about dreams, and it had a lot of what you might expect: angsty struggles with invisible things, dueling faux bitchslaps and round kicks, slo-mo sequences. Gregg is young, but the dance's tropes – new to him, perhaps – were, in a broader context, already tired.

I voted for the piece I'd most like to see again: Gabrielle Lamb's "Dovetail," which was the jury's least favorite. To plucky, circusy music, the ensemble of nine sustained a viscous quality. Lamb's inspiration for the piece was ballet-company life, which was fodder for bits of humor: a vignette of women who splayed their hands atop their heads like tiaras, and three dancers, looking on from the corner at another's apparent breakdown, fluttering their hands in periodic punctuation. Though the music became tiresome once it reached a relentless jogging pace, "Dovetail" had complexity, loveliness, humanity, and a novel point of view.

Jimmy Orrante's "Ya Me Fue," which the jury awarded second place, was a fine work, too. In duets and trios to the songs of Maria Dolores Pradera, there was tenderness around every corner, and subtle extensions had tango-like sensuousness.

I stand with the majority of the audience in congratulating the dancers, who were cast and showcased well in each work. However, I don't share the audience's nonchalance about the self-congratulatory tweets projected during intermissions. Added to the precurtain commercials and clips shown when program notes would do, the tweets tip screen-time at the ballet into overload mode; the theatre is no longer a temporary dam between us and the omnipresent stream. Art feels best when it's saving us from something. When it's tangled up in the thing we most need to be saved from, it feels like propaganda.

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[BACK TO TOP ^](#)

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