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Dance review: Liz Lerman achieves sublime fusion of art and physics

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There's a two-page bibliography for Liz Lerman's new dance, "The Matter of Origins," and extensive program notes on such things as the Manhattan Project and dark energy. At the show's premiere Friday at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Center, the audience was given questionnaires to fill out before and after the performance. But peel away the heavily freighted context -- the research and history and consultation with academics that went into it -- and what you have in this hour-long contemplation of the universe is a work of expansive range, emotional depth and singular beauty.

The expressive possibilities of unartful realms is Lerman's passion, and that sensibility infuses "The Matter of Origins." Are you turned off by physics? Hate math? Here is none of the dryness but plenty of the inquiry and mystery that fuels this branch of science, so impenetrable to most of us.

For all the times when the piece turns to real-world anchors -- video tours of the Large Hadron Collider at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), or glimpses through the Hubble Space Telescope -- Lerman gently steers it back to poetic turf, an intimate universe inhabited by the glorious dancers of her Dance Exchange. Watching them -- among others, the quiet charisma of Martha Wittman, age 75, Ted Johnson's grandeur that also conveys a kind of wisdom, Tamara Pullman's pearly warmth -- you sense the awe that brought Lerman to her subject. It's the wonder of humanity itself.

Yet the matter of our origins is only tangentially addressed here. The title is a playful twist on the search for the origins of matter underway in experiments to replicate the big bang at CERN (research now in question, given recent news that the particle accelerators will shut down in 2012, to cut costs).

But this work's "Where did we come from?" line of inquiry fades as the more dramatic aspects of the piece take over. These center on personalities in the field of physics: There is Marie Curie, who, we learn, kept a vial of radium salts by her bed (unaware that its "fairy dust" glow was slowly killing her). As Curie's recipe for radium is recited in a voice-over, we watch Wittman rush around in a pinafore, chasing, perhaps, the impossibility of measurement.

There's also a modern-day physicist and his wife who lie in bed and muse about why the mattress doesn't collapse beneath them, given that atoms aren't solid. (Who knew?) And we meet Edith Warner, whose tearoom near the Los Alamos birthplace of the atomic bomb was frequented by the scientists working there during World War II, enjoying her pastries while pondering the mechanics of doom.

The piece offered an unusually rich theatrical experience. From start to finish one was immersed in enveloping atmospheres, whether of natural beauty (a stage-spanning panorama of New Mexico), towering machinery or bold abstractions of formulas and principles. This impressive visual power was the work of scenic and lighting designer Michael Mazzola and projection designer Logan Kibens. Darron L. West created a fluid and multi-textured soundscape, and Naoko Nagata's simple layered costumes in quiet shades of gray were both chic and homespun.

Awash in all of this sensory power, we are unprepared for the work's poignant close. One by one, the dancers leave the stage, until there is just Pullman, kneeling and passing a hand across the stage, and Keith Thompson, stepping slowly, arms open . . . both of them seeming to question, in silence, what had just passed, and what is

to come. Like physics itself, "The Matter of Origins" posits the small and the large, side by side.

But there was more. After intermission, the audience was ushered into one of three rooms and seated at tables with a "provocateur" who prompted discussion over tea and chocolate cake made from Warner's recipe, and periodic dancing by Dance Exchange members and students. Whether this part worked or not depends on how much you enjoy chatting about the bomb with strangers in a large noisy room with no alcohol. But the cake was divine.

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