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In a Struggle of Wills, Who Is Really the Manipulator?

*This frail construction of quick nerves and bones
Cannot sustain the shock of elements;
This temporary blend of blood and dust
Was put together only to dissolve*

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Voltaire wrote these words in 1755, in his “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster.” But what described, in philosophical terms, a terrible earthquake is also a startlingly apt description of the fluid, explosive style phrases cultivated by the Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite, whose “Dark Matters” had its East Coast premiere last week in Montclair State University’s Peak Performances series.

A recording of Voltaire’s lines plays intermittently during the two-hour work, performed by Ms. Pite’s troupe, Kidd Pivot

Frankfurt RM. The company is now based in Germany, where its creator spent five years in William Forsythe’s Ballett Frankfurt. That lineage is immediately apparent in Ms. Pite’s buckling, rippling phrases, in which movement impulses might begin at any point in the body, sending tides of undulating but tightly controlled energy coursing through the dancers’ honed, muscular forms (and often seeming to continue flowing through to their colleagues). Though the choreography is finely wrought, it also looks as if it might fly apart at any moment, unraveling the group’s hard-fought equilibrium; the performers’ world, we see, is put together only to dissolve.

And so is the larger theatrical universe of “Dark Matters,” a two-part work that begins with a symbiotic struggle of wills between a Bunraku puppet (credited to Robert Lewis and Valerie Moffat, and manipulated by

Kidd Pivot Frankfurt RM Montclair State University

black-clad puppeteers) and his maker, danced by Peter Chu. The increasingly violent battle takes place in the inventor’s old-fashioned chamber (the set is designed by Jay Gower Taylor), which the puppet begins to pull apart at the seams as his creator fails to pay enough attention to him.

Soon enough there is carnage, which the puppeteers clean up, only to fall into their own squabbles. Everything comes crashing down, eventually leaving the stage littered with props and bodies, as the work’s tone zigs and zags puzzlingly between a mood of sinister cinematic drama and slapstick buffoonery, with touches of self-conscious “we are making Theater” thrown in.

Everyone’s strings are being pulled by someone, with, as Vol-

taire wrote, silence being “the verdict of the vastest mind.” (And there is a good deal of silence in the cinematic collage score, which includes original music by Owen Belton and lots of special-effects noises.)

This is all rather silly and overdone (though there are some pretty great martial arts fight scenes). These points about fate, what little we control and what we cannot ultimately grasp, are big, obvious ones, and Ms. Pite spends rather a lot of energy in spelling them out rather too clearly. Her directorial instincts are not as nuanced as her choreographic ones.

Dancing swings back to the fore after the intermission. The work’s themes remain, but are now fractured through a choreographic lens — and gorgeously enfolded in Robert Sondergaard’s lighting design, which uses darkness as much as light to frame, contextualize and sometimes undercut the action. (Here,



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Peter Chu (and black-clad puppeteers) in Crystal Pite’s “Dark Matters,” part of Montclair State’s Peak Performance series.

also, Mr. Forsythe’s influence is on display.)

Waves of bodies crash and subside on the stage, now uncluttered, save mainly for the light stanchions that create roving spotlights. A shadow puppeteer (the exquisite Sandra Marín García) remains, shedding her

clothes at the end to emerge like a puppet herself, suggesting a continuing cycle of confused creation and destruction. By unmooring the action from the points she wants to make, Ms. Pite creates a bit more room for the imagination. The shadows, happily, creep in.