

Theater & Dance

# 'FAiTH' is authentic, powerful portrayal of ballerinas on the brink

By **Rebecca Ritzel** March 6 at 4:05 PM

From Moira Shearer in “The Red Shoes” to Natalie Portman in “Black Swan,” Hollywood has always loved a good depiction of a ballerina on the brink. Such cinematic portrayals will never be as authentic, beautiful and powerful as “FAiTH,” a new dance theater work created by Czech artist Miřenka Āechova.

“FAiTH” had its U.S. premiere Saturday at the Atlas Performing Arts Center. As is often the case with the best guest artists presented at the Northeast venue, Āechova deserved a larger audience, especially given that she began working on the piece while in residence at the Atlas in 2013. “FAiTH” premiered in Prague the following year and has since toured Europe, finally making it back to the States on Saturday, when it was presented in a black-box theater slightly more than half full.

“FAiTH” has the power to bowl over anyone who is fascinated by dancers, has taken ballet or has simply experienced the acute anxiety of aging, of being betrayed by corporal tissue maintained like a well-oiled machine. Like past Āechova works presented in the District, “FAiTH” is autobiographical. She comes onstage first, accompanied by the soundtrack of what might be a noisy New York street. She strips and, in her underwear, begins to warm up in what might be one of the last tiny dance studios in SoHo. A custom soundtrack of ambient jazz plays in the background, while on a screen behind Āechova, monochromatic images of nature past its peak — falling leaves, dying dandelions, bare trees — provide a contrast to the seemingly young, energetic dancer alone in the rehearsal room with a crowd of ghosts in her brain.

Andrea Miltnerova, the second dancer in “FAiTH,” first appears in a cloud of dirty tulle. Wearing a decaying tutu, she rolls onstage and slowly comes to life by doing a series of runner’s stretches mimicked by Āechova on the opposite side. From here, they take turns as the focal point, their movements coming in and out of unison. Miltnerova, who is obviously older and has a ballerina’s bearing, often counted aloud as she ran through port de bras (arm sequences), tendu drills and deep, thigh-burning grand plies. Without jumps or lifts, “FAiTH” conveys the unbearable heaviness of balletic training. The piece closes with Miltnerova’s recorded voice reading a long list of seasons, ballets and roles. “1998-1999, ‘Giselle,’ Myrtha,” etc. They’re too specific to be made up, and they aren’t; they’re the roles danced by Tatiana Juricova, Āechova’s teacher at the Czech National Ballet who died in 2002 at age 37. From watching the weary dancer onstage in “FAiTH,” you might think dancing killed Juricova. It didn’t. Life without ballet did.