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DANCE REVIEW

Troupe connects with disconnect

By Janine Parker, Globe Correspondent | August 15, 2009

BECKET - Choreographer-dancer Victor Quijada seems like a sweet guy, but he sure can be bossy. At the beginning of "Punto Ciego" ("Blind Spot"), which he and his Montreal-based RUBBERBANDance Group are performing this week at Jacob's Pillow, we in the audience were told to shush. Near the end we were told to pay attention, to trust and be open, and to breathe deeply. These are the basics of Theater Etiquette 101, but also pretty good guidelines for life.

Quijada, his co-artistic director, Anne Plamondon, and their four dancers are excellent, versatile performers, at home in Quijada's vocabulary, which is a seamless blend of contemporary movement spiked with street dance and ballet. Celebrity, technology, and their pitfalls - loneliness and disconnect even in this age of hyper-cyber accessibility - are themes.

In "Punto Ciego," Plamondon takes the floor as an actress interviewed/hounded by Quijada's sycophantic television "personality"; Lila-Mae G. Talbot begins one sequence like a starlet posing for the cameras, but by the end she too is hunted, her flailing body caught in a stark strobe light as she's lifted up like merchandise. Restlessness abounds, too: Frederic Tavernini writhes about the stage as if he's being harassed by an invisible swarm of mosquitoes, and two sleek couches are pushed all around the stage as the performers try yet another viewpoint.

Excepting the odd pause at about the halfway point (it's not an intermission, but the house lights are confusingly brought up, an abrupt and unfortunate interruption), the work's nonlinear scenes weave a strange, beautiful dream web. Yan Lee Chan's lighting design reminds us of the omnipresence of television, whether it's a murky blue-green haze similar to what one sees when driving past houses at night, or the sharp flicker of geometric shapes, like channels being clicked, then rejected. These effects work most powerfully in the masterful sextet that Quijada develops with restraint before unleashing the dancers into a great maelstrom of movement.

Jasper Gahunia's score also enhances the work's surreality, taking fragments of classical pieces along with his own original music and warping them almost beyond recognition through hip-hop-style scratching and other audio/tempo altering techniques. Sometimes the dancers reflect this stuttering soundscape with jerky movements; at other times, their fluidity strikingly counterbalances it. Surprisingly, the effect isn't jarring, although the occasional stretch of real-time melody was welcome, especially in a lovely, tender duet between Talbot and Mariusz Ostrowski.

Interestingly, partnering forms the heart of a work that's so much about our fear of connection. True, there are lots of amusingly hostile duets - yanking and pushing in place of leading and supporting - but there are also many moments between Quijada and the gorgeous, tactile Plamondon in which they seem to morph into extensions of each other, a fifth limb. Looping around stage on Quijada's back, Plamondon may be trying to flee, or trying to fly. Is she bound or freed by him?

However playful, the admonitions to the audience (shh, pay attention) feel awkwardly tacked onto this otherwise evocative and absorbing evening-length dance. With art, one has the freedom to form one's own opinion. When the art is abstract (and most dance falls into that category), it deepens the opportunity to make a connection, to figure out what it makes you think of, what it makes you feel . . . what you think it's "about." The viewer always has some responsibility; Quijada should trust more in his own craft - and in his audiences' ability to digest it. ■

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