

DANCE | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Fish, Stilettos and Underwear: The Dances Go On

By BRIAN SEIBERT JAN. 31, 2017

Her headdress was three sizes larger than her head, the better to catch the falling snow. In one hand she held a fish.

That was at the Kitchen. At the Museum of Modern Art, women in stiletto boots imitated apes and British dance.

At Abrons Arts Center, a man and a woman in their underwear used each other as gymnastics equipment and locked lips for minutes on end. Over in Brooklyn, Trisha Brown dancers performed classic pieces in the library, competing with ... philosophy.

Goddesses and Pagans

“Slavic Goddesses — A Wreath of Ceremonies” was conceived by the Polish artist Paulina Olowska. Her costumes, borrowing from a 1918 series of paintings in which the Polish artist Zofia Stryjenska imagined deities from Slavic mythology, are fantastical and marvelous. Around the body, they retain some of a painting’s flatness, yet the headdresses, which Stryjenska likened to halos, spread out sculpturally. The effect is of a human pop-up book.

The show isn’t as static as a series of tableaux vivants (people posing, as if in paintings), but neither is it kinetically exciting. The choreography — by Katy Pyle and members of Ballez, who impersonate the goddesses (and a few gods) one by one — is individuated without being very interesting. Touches of folk

dance fail to kick it out of the low action-density of pageantry or into poetry, and Sergei Tcherepnin's music (spare and odd, when not New Age-y and synthesized) doesn't help. The amateur-theatricals quality has a certain charm, but "the Slavic spirit" Stryjenska wrote about is a force more potent than this production can summon.

You could find something closer to it, something more pagan, in Alexandra Bachzetsis's "Massacre: Variations on a Theme." Performed in the Marron Atrium at the Museum of Modern Art, the work is modern on its surface: three women in T-shirts and tight jeans, moving and posing with the blank affect of fashion models, putting on and taking off stiletto boots or gloves wrapped in packing tape. The pagan violence comes through Tobias Koch's score: a volcanic composition clearly based on "The Rite of Spring," hammered by two pianists, dressed like house painters, who seem to play every note on the keyboard, and sometimes — somewhat spookily — by one of the pianos apparently playing itself.

The physicality of the music and how it's produced give urgency and direction to the choreography. Here, it's movement more than imagery that has been appropriated: the obsessive rocking and progressive spasms of tarantism (the condition believed in the Middle Ages to be caused by a tarantula bite); the cool swiveling of Northern Soul (the British dance inspired by African-American soul music).

When one of the women seems to bisect herself with tall mirrors, the conflation of missing and extra body parts is Surrealistic. (Such art-historical echoes register more strongly in the companion video installation, projected on the atrium's walls during museum hours.) There's eroticism — pelvic thrusts, shaking like twerking, the sensuality of hair — but the women stay as dispassionate as bored strippers.

As the disparate movement modes merge, the similarities spark mental circuits, suggesting something powerful and dangerous that the work won't disclose. One of the women strips off her outfit to reveal an identical one underneath. But none of that is as arresting as when the women, loping like apes, catch the eyes of viewers close by with a gaze uncannily like that of

primates in a zoo — the kind of piercing, accusatory communication that's all the more unsettling because you wonder if you really saw it.

The Slow Labor of Love

The two dancers in Jan Martens's "Sweat Baby Sweat," which had its New York premiere at the Abrons Arts Center on Friday, stare only at each other, for an hour. Theirs is a closed system in which other people do not exist. It's a relationship, and as everyone knows, relationships take effort, represented here by the woman climbing on the man or hanging upside down on him, or by their slowly rolling together like acrobats, even as they kiss.

This is a relentless work, methodically paced, even maddening as it repeats from the beginning to try for a different outcome. My mind often wandered. But the piece rewards attention. The confusions of desire cloud it like ink in clear water, and it has a sense of humor, winking with the endless folk-song verses of a love ballad by Cat Power ("Willie Deadwilder"). Conveying something all-consuming takes time.

Lost in the Library

On Saturday "A Night of Philosophy & Ideas" filled the stately central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library with philosophical lectures through the evening into the next morning, supplemented by screenings and performances. I stayed long enough to see performances by the Trisha Brown Dance Company fade into a Grand Lobby swirling improbably with lovers of philosophy.

The 30-minute program of short works and excerpts, repeated with slight variations at intervals throughout the long night, belonged, philosophically speaking. These are pieces that embody ideas clearly and sensuously, and the multigenerational cast danced them beautifully. But in a large and bustling space, their delicacy looks thin. For me, the image that stuck was that of the dancer Leah Morrison in a corridor, flowing through the additive sequences of "Accumulation" as people flowed past her on their way to lectures. A sad image (she was ignored) and a heartening one, too (she was ignored for philosophy).

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