

April 21, 2009

In Regard of Flight Distance

**“Celui Qui Regarde”, “Flight Distance”, “The gentleness was in her hands”,
“Adventures in a Foreign Land”**

Helen Simoneau

Joyce Soho

New York, NY

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By Martha Sherman

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We finally got a glimpse of Helen Simoneau halfway through her evening of work at the Joyce Soho. A French-Canadian, she is a small, fine-featured woman who crafts her disciplined, athletic movements on her own body. Simoneau and several of her dancers trained together at the North Carolina School of the Arts (NCSA). Their movement suggests a shared history, although Simoneau did not dance with them. All are strong, clean dancers, and Simoneau inhabits her movement most powerfully among them. But it is her group choreography, not the solos, that tells the more interesting stories.

Three of the pieces in this program were premieres, including her solo (“The gentleness was in her hands”) that is destined for the upcoming Athens International Dance Festival. Much of this program still looked like work in progress -- a young choreographer exploring several directions, across several aspects of relationship. One of the premieres, “Flight Distance” was defined in the artist’s note in the program as “a term used for the distance that an individual will place between itself and another ... [varying] from person to person and from species to species.” It was a useful term for anchoring the other group pieces as well, even though the way the dancers evoked distance was inconsistent; some movement and interconnections unique and striking, some more repetitive and less effective.

The opening tableau of “Flight Distance” was an asymmetrical pose of five dancers, a preview of the satisfying unpredictability of many of the movements and connections of the piece. The dancers progressed through different levels of intersection as they explored distance, pairing, interweaving, and eventually, collision and conflict. Simoneau used the broad Joyce Soho stage for long diagonals, and then moved to smaller structured spaces created by lighting designer Carrie Wood, whose light squares framed confining spaces on stage. The most memorable image was of four women dancing in a gently interlocked quartet, winding around each other, close and layered.

The strongest segments of the program were its opening and closing. “Celui Qui Regarde” was set to a Baudelaire poem and had a finished quality that the three premieres had not yet achieved. Three dancers, Gena Mann, Catherine Miller, and Adrienne Westwood, emerged in dramatic black and red cape-like skirts (this piece’s costumes were designed by Renee Jurz and Lisa Weller). The sweep of their individual

movements and the skirts was mesmerizing, and the dancers' fingers, hands, and exposed backs added beautiful detail to the larger movement. After moving through a series of architectural triangles, the dancers balanced between a soft duet of intersections, and clean interspersed solos. In a satisfying finale, the dancers' skirts, like matadors' capes, swirled through the air.

The closing piece, "Adventures in a Foreign Land" was the most interesting, and the least finished, piece of the evening. The stage was bare as it had been throughout the evening, except for the lighting sources (in this case, the soft Apple logo glow of the laptop used by sound designer Jonathon Melville Pratt). To the electric soundtrack, the dancers entered creeping across the stage with buttocks high, and later moving through the space prone, in backstroke. The four dancers soon became one interconnected human structure, literally climbing the walls and each other, joining the soundtrack with their own pops and slurps, venturing to every corner of the stage. When the dancers ended, the audience wasn't ready to let go; the dance didn't seem quite done.

Simoneau codes her choreography like an athlete with a soft exterior, a fist inside a glove. Her pieces have underpinnings of yoga poses, push-ups, leg kicks, animal movements. Even the subtler movements like pointing or stretching are forceful. Simoneau's tendency toward repetition or symmetry became clichéd, as if there came a point in the choreography where she got fatigued. The early asymmetry and curiosity of "Flight Distance" eventually gave way to an escalating level of collision; by the end of the piece, the movement conflict became predictable. Despite the repetition, the discipline and strength of the dancers were striking and effective. Her next steps will tell us more.

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