

Helen Simoneau Danse at BAM Fisher

Elena Light
June 7, 2014

Lately, I've been questioning the relationship between form and meaning in twenty-first century performance. Modernism embraced meaning emerging from form: George Balanchine's non-narrative ballets saw music embodied in movement. Conversely, postmodernism was form following meaning: Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* was essentially her "No Manifesto" embodied, and stylized form was rejected in favor of pedestrianism. If these two paradigms have been exhausted, what are we to do in today's post-postmodernist era? It's the question of the new century, I suppose.

This question definitely arose last night, watching three works (two NYC premieres and one repertory piece) by Québécois choreographer Helen Simoneau at BAM Fisher (a second night of performances is today, June 7 at 8pm).

To open the evening, Simoneau presented *Paper Wings*, a work originally conceived at American Dance Festival that featured ten female dancers for its New York iteration. It started strong: the stage slowly lit up to reveal a grid of women stepping forward and back, hips shoved out, shoulders back, as if aggressively introducing themselves to the audience.

For all the intricate and well-executed dancing in the piece (shout-out to my friend Meg Weeks, whose subtle strength beautifully embodied present-day femininity), it was the simplest moments that resonated most. A line of dancers snapping their right-hand fingers, stopping unexpectedly as in a cruel joke; a group of four dancers posing as triumphant models with fake smiles, shoulders turned, eyes upward like I'd imagine a Hilary Clinton headshot.

It felt like a feminist thesis, with a bit too much "girl power" sentimentalism to be all-around effective. The pink shirt and purple skirt costumes coupled with a portion of a crooning love song compounded this effect. Still, I felt it was the strongest of the evening's works: it said something with choreography rather than relying too heavily on the virtuosity of its dancers.

Helen Simoneau herself was the evening's most virtuosic performer. In *the gentleness was in her hands*, a solo for Simoneau presented second, the choreographer performed as a lone puppet, doing movements that appeared to be caused by some external force. She managed to riff on *Coppelia* with steps that were startlingly fresh: a favorite involved Simoneau standing in a near-second split and reaching a

straightened arm under her legs until she was flat on the floor, immobilized by her own limbs. Michael Wall's score was gorgeous, but its eerie serenity made the work all about the mood, and not much more.

Simoneau's final and perhaps most anticipated work, *among the newly familiar* (created as part of a Baryshnikov Arts Center residency this year) presented a similar conundrum. The dancers were wonderfully idiosyncratic (especially the spritely Ariel Freedman), and the movements were often unexpected and interesting, strung together in ways that made me applaud Simoneau's ingenuity.

And yet, the work was all about form and the kinesthetic experience. As an audience member, it was certainly enjoyable to watch each dancer's stunning solo, flying from the floor to a jump in a split second, and I could discern the performers' visible appreciation for each other. But, the choreographic structure was rather expected, and I eventually grew bored with what seemed a purely aesthetic creation.

In an interview with Simoneau during her BAC residency she explained, "I try to just make material without judging it, without deciding what it's going to be about. And then after we do that for a while, then I go in with a director's eye and try to decide what fits together and what informs the next."

Simoneau's answer to making dances results in moments of beauty, surprise, and aesthetic revelation, but she appears to be a modernist at heart, and it seems to me that the complexity of today's world requires more than form as a starting point.

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