

ATE9'S MOVERS AND SHAKERS "POP" AT JACOB'S PILLOW

By: Janine Parker
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BECKET — Danielle Agami, the founding director and choreographer of the Los Angeles-based dance company Ate9, cut her teeth at the mighty house of Batsheva, the enormously inspiring and influential modern dance company based in Israel. Like any healthy offspring, she wears her lineage proudly while also daring to begin the work of molding her own style.

In the program of two works that Agami's group is performing at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival this week, three things jump out. The movement is rich and strange, otherworldly; amidst all the strangeness is a faint sense of humanity; and finally, thankfully, there is a very fine line of wit threaded throughout the works.

Sly silliness is hinted at in the surreal scene of dancers scattered in a line upstage as the audience enters the Doris Duke Theatre. One is slowly blowing up a white balloon, another appears to be eating popcorn. Further down the line a dancer sits, zombie-like, with what look like flowers in her hair and in her mouth. A little red toy car scoots around the stage, seemingly of its own free will. What does it all mean? Apparently, absolutely nothing. The lights go out on this Dada-esque array, and when they come up again a moment later, the dancers are lined up in the stage right wings, and the first dance, "Exhibit b," begins.

Meanwhile, Agami is serious about the craft of dancemaking, and in the dancers she chooses: in the final tallies of her "Exhibit b" and "vickie" the many seemingly-random sections, and odd phrases filled with purposely awkward movement are necessary, if mystifying, parts which coalesce, by some sleight of hand, into ultimately satisfying wholes. Which doesn't mean that the two dances are just baggy free-for-alls. It's clear that the weirdness is meticulously plotted out, wildflowers planted amidst Agami's finely cultivated unison work and exacting partnering sequences.

About those dancers: In addition to Agami (although unlisted in the cast, she performed in "vickie," the second piece on the program) the performers are exceptionally vivid. It's more than just a case of "different body types:" they are highly individualistic movers. In their choreographically-disparate moments their differences are fascinating, while their uniquenesses make the unison sections thrilling.

They all "pop," even in the bland beige of Agami's costumes for "Exhibit b" (she also designed the costumes for "vickie"), and in that dance's reliance on largely neutral facial expressions. Constructed of a series of task-based scenes punctuated by Jeff Forbes' cinematic lighting, at times the dancers enter and exit the stage with either inscrutable purpose — why do they all continue to stride so doggedly across the stage, even though something keeps pushing them back? — or with mysterious lethargy — why do they drip out of the wings and swoon to the floor? One "task" involves them running to form a new vertical or horizontal line here or there, competitively seeking a prime spot; in another they seem to be vying to win a "worst-posture" contest. Heel-toeing themselves forward, they step into first position plis, chins jutting forward, ribs splayed, tailbones sticking out. Then, in another "arbitrary" section, the dancers traverse the stage, overlapping one another in solos filled with fiercely-slicing limbs or big,

athletic jumps, their fabulous bodies just diving into the movement.

Eventually the glorious chaos is disrupted by a succession of savage mini-duels. While we know they are "fake," Agami yet captures the "real" thing that pushes us to push back at others, and her dancers have the guts (and stage savvy to ultimately be safe) to go at each other ferociously. Finally, two of the men face each other, take off their tops and bottoms, trade sides, and put the other's clothes on. It's almost an "aww, shucks" moment — a beat goes by, but instead of hugging, they lunge at each other again. It's a surprising, pitch-perfect, and nano-second moment of hilarity. (And, somewhere deeper than the humor is the unsettling truth that our species can't seem to break out of its violent cycle.) But Agami's not blood-thirsty: in the end, the dancers all disappear upstage, a unified group.

In the pulled-up hoods of Agami's striking black/black and white costumes for "vickie," the spectre of Death looms. An element of fear creeps in, with a dancer poking all over at her body, as if warding off bugs, another bites his hand anxiously. But when the topic of battle is reprised in "vickie," at first the ensemble members aren't fighting amongst themselves, but rather have formed ranks against an unseen enemy: they march and pause in stylized formations.

After another surprise shift of mood, like the one in "Exhibit b" — Rebecah Goldstone reappears in a red dress, and dances a solo to a sappy song that pushes its way out of the otherwise eclectic and compelling score — smaller duels begin anew, this time out of duets that begin tenderly before something small goes awry. Here too, Agami isn't finally cynical: though the couples struggle, they also catch their partners just before they hit the ground, or surrender to an offer. Two couples — Goldstone/Agami and Joseph Kudra/Gary Reagan — share long, deeply passionate kisses while the others back away. Are they jealous or chastened? Thibaut Eiferman performs a gorgeously strange, introspective solo in an eerily deepening green hue but stops short when Goldstone reenters. He backs off just as Kudra comes tearing back in, perhaps hurtling himself straight into Goldstone. (We don't know what happens, though, because the lights abruptly go out.) Endings don't get more delicious than that.

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