

Feld Raises an American Hurrah; Childs and Sperling Gift-Wrap Solos

TRANSFORMING SPIRITS

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

» Jody Sperling's engrossing solo program at Joyce Soho hinged on transformation. A scholar and critic as well as a performer-choreographer, Sperling has long been studying and reconstructing the dances of Loie Fuller—fin de siècle mistress of fabric and light; and the inspiration for Sperling's new

Dance of the Elements, to piano music by Chopin, Ravel, Falla, et al. Being a postmodern person, Sperling shows the preparation, inserting long wands into her voluminous white silk robe, which David Ferri will magic with light. In "Earth," she's a woman with vast wings; in "Water," she goes deeper into metamorphosis, roiling and swirling, engulfed in silk foam; in "Wind," Fuller's famous lily image becomes a small tornado. "Fire" begins low, with red-lit fabric rising. In the waltz

of "Ether," we see Sperling's body again—the woman within.

Like solo dancers of old, Sperling develops vivid images with relative brevity. In *Cheap*, to sweet piano music by Roberto Pace and the occasional sound of a flickering movie projector, she emerges into a spotlight dressed in a striped shirt, trunks, and knee pads, but her moves are those of a novice in an old-time music hall whose main gimmick is to link a wrist and ankle with elastic rope and squirm decoratively and triumphantly through it. Degas's statue of a little dancer comes to horrid life in *Bunhead's Back!*; Melissa Rodnon wears a worried mask (by Joshua Blaker) on the back of her head and a wig over her face. Walking in splayed fourth position, she's a travesty of the discipline-stiffened student (she has a magnificent "back bend" but trouble leaning forward). In a solo version of *Washed Up*, Sperling becomes the fairy-tale mermaid who loved a human, revealing dreamy, marine yearnings and then the painful reality (wonderfully imagined) of walking.

The transformations are more complex in *Orlando*, inspired by Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel and set to music by Quentin Chippetta. As Woolf's gender-shifting heroine, the corseted Sperling dons a jockstrap and makes sure it shows through her bloomers like a codpiece. Sometimes she's tough, lashing the air with a stick, sometimes softer, and sometimes indeterminate as she jumps through a modern equivalent of the Elizabethan galliard. You feel confusion seething, as if her sensibilities were changing in spite of her.

