



Flash Review 2, 5-15: Time-Lapse

Back to the Future with Fuller and Sperling

By Vanessa Manko / Copyright 2003 Vanessa Manko

NEW YORK -- Though Loie Fuller, the turn-of-the-century dance innovator, secured a patent for her legendary fabrics and wands -- tools with which she created imaginative and transformative dances -- her invention is now within the realm of public domain. And thankfully, for this fact allows Jody Sperling an opportunity to create dances fashioned after Fuller's works. Her work was on view this past weekend when Jody Sperling/Time Lapse Dance presented a series of Fuller-inspired solos and other duets at Williamsburg Arts Nexus (WAX). In the spirit of a 19th-century vaudevillian review, where Fuller herself got her start, Sperling's evening was a mix of comedic, acrobatic, and most of all transporting works. Such a range of styles -- bridged and conceived with equal amounts of polish -- points to Sperling's artistic strength and curatorial zeal.

"La Nuit" is a treasure. A la Fuller, Sperling in black, billowing cape transforms herself into a creature of the night; she emerges as a dark and foreboding presence with her black cape draped over her body, her white face peering out like one of Macbeth's witches gone astray. As the billowing increases, the fabric is folded and refolded, and manipulated with a magical dexterity, eventually revealing a stunning tulle evening gown that shimmers and sparkles. Its almost as if costume designer Michelle Ferranti had cut a swath of starlit sky for Sperling to don. But more than just costume-as-transformation, Sperling moves with intrinsic grace and command, conjuring the essence of evening.

"Bunhead's Back!" is a farcical little piece, set to Ponchielli, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky. Here, Degas's immortal "Petite Danseuse" comes to life, though not in the way one would imagine. Instead, the dancer, performed here by Melissa Rodnon (who is incidentally co-founder and director of WAX) is literally backwards: Rodnon's face is covered by that famous pulled back ponytail while the back of her head is covered by Joshua Baker's beguiling mask. Confusing? Not half as much as watching the dancing -- and this is not a put-down. It's fun to have one's sense of what is normal get all convoluted. This whimsical piece inverts all the classical ballet poses -- barre exercises, port de bras, epaulement - - so that we cannot tell the dancer's front from back, or at least the dancer's real front and back. In order to create this effect, Rodnon must distort her body. To place her arms in first position port de bras, for instance, Rodnon bends her arms back so that -- freakishly -- she is able to create the illusion of the otherwise proper arm movements. Just imagine the pirouettes!

Next we venture into a bawdy physical comedy routine with the acrobatic and witty "Cheaper." Sperling and Ashley Sowell, clad in Ferranti's bold pink and purple striped gymnastic tunics, perform a series of rather daring physical feats. They also manage to tie themselves and each other into knots -- and these are not the kind of knots into which Balanchine wished to tie his leggy dancers. Sperling is highly experimental here, and tests the limits of the body, bending a leg up as high as it will go, cranking limbs every which way. Quentin Chiappetta's music provides hilarious sound effects for the physical antics -- a creaky door, popping, whistling, sirens, plates crashing. Sperling and Sowell also one-up each other. When Sowell performs her "strong-man," or should I say, "strong-woman," routine -- holding her body weight up on her arms, curving her legs up and over her body so that they touch the top of her head -- Sperling performs a bit of pointe shoe toe tapping. To say Sowell is strong is an understatement. The piece is witty and fun and rounds out Sperling's movement style.

"Sympt-o-matic" presents a stark change in tone and mood and deals with the body's vulnerability in the face of the Western medical establishment. It's austere, cold, and infused with the sterility of the hospital ward. Rodnon, in white hospital gown, lies on the stage. A bright, blinding spotlight pours down, and from behind a draped curtain, the shadow of a doctor (Sperling) looms over the scenario. A booming, authoritative male doctor's voice asks calm, pointed questions and adds an unnerving element to the work -- no bedside manner at work here. Rodnon moves frantically, as if trying to escape her ailing body. A series of rigid, repetitive movements bespeaks the humbling and, at times, humiliating tests and trials that are the patient's lot. All the while, Sperling stands poised with her clipboard. Sperling has created an interesting blend of movement to convey the ordeal of the patient. Rodnon's desperation shows in each moving flail and shake.

Sperling's Fulleresque works bookend the performance, and if "La Nuit" was a fine, enchanting opening, "Dance of the Elements," in which the choreographer transforms herself with fabric and wands into Earth, Water, Wind, Fire, and Ether, is just as mesmerizing. Beginning with Earth in large billowing white swaths of fabric, Sperling transforms herself into mountains and hills. With an ever-commanding presence, she then morphs into rippling water. In Wind, Sperling portrays both gentle and fierce winds, while turning into violent flaming fire and serenely closing with Ether. What is so striking about using the fabric in this way is that while only one large swath is manipulated, as Sperling spins and whirls around, layers and layers seem to unfurl from the spectacle, which results in the large flowers and orchids that Fuller herself created. Jeffrey Middleton's music adds to the illusory effect.

Sperling has displayed a range of styles here -- from serene, moving works, to the more comedic, exhibited in "Bunhead's Back" and "Cheaper." Yet, by far, the Fuller-inspired works take the cake here and Sperling is a fine interpreter, exuding the wily, confident, knowing surety that one imagines Fuller herself might have performed with.