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writers on dancing

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Conjuring Loie Fuller

Dance of the Elements

Time Lapse Dance

Nitery Theater, Stanford University

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Howling winds and slashing rains couldn't keep me from traveling to Stanford the other evening despite the fact that my little car was telling me in no uncertain terms that it didn't belong on a freeway during such a dark and stormy night. But then how many chances does one get to see something at least approximating what the mother of modern dance, one Loie Fuller, of Fullersburg, Ill and Paris, France, might have looked like?

Choreographer/historian Jody Sperling was to present a one-time only lecture/demonstration on Fuller. No hurricane-like conditions were going to stop me from getting an

approximation of what Fuller started with such might consequences in the last decade of the 19th century.

While Sperling did talk about Fuller's innovations—the use of the darkened auditorium, dance as a medium for abstraction and her experimenting with lighting and stage craft design—more pertinently she subjected Fuller to the prism of post-modern scholarship. Specifically Sperling looked at Fuller's use of that most slippery of academic subjects, the human body. In Fuller, she said "there is this tension between the ephemeral and the corporeal. The body is invisible, and yet, of course, it is there." Contemporary ideas on transformation, instability, shifting identity, revealing the hidden, negotiating back and foreground—all ideas that can plausibly be theorized in Fuller's work. But their proof is ultimately found in the physicality of the art. Here Sperling's arguments were the most convincing.

Watching the five-part *Dance of the Elements* (2002) to music by, among others, Ravel, Chopin, De Falla (pianist, on tape, Jeffrey Middleton) was pure delight. The work, which is an imagined rendition of Fuller's piece consists of portrayals of the natural elements of earth, water, fire, wind and ether. Part of its freshness lies in the way it straddles—like many of the recent experiments in the circus arts—popular and high art. Many circus artists have started working with huge amounts of fabrics; they might profitably take a look what Fuller did over a hundred years ago.

Michelle Ferranti constructed the all-white silk costume which looked like it consisted of a long white dress that flared a little at the bottom, a couple of slightly more flaring overskirts and a huge cape, buttoned at the neck which the rods in Sperling's hands extended to ten feet. The subtle and nicely airy lighting design by David Ferri was relatively simple but created sculpturing shadows and transparencies which enhanced the moving fabric's impact. It also effectively suggested what Fuller's more elaborate designs, which included patterned gels and magic lantern projections, must have been like.

In 'Earth', Sperling's spacious choreography suggested swooping hills and shadowed valleys as she advanced and receded with the cape an all encompassing cover. 'Water' had a surging, eddying quality which moved through three or four differently rippling levels. 'Fire' started low on the ground and moved from side to side, gradually expanding its reach. The skippy, lightly trod 'Ether' ended with the dancer completely disappearing inside a swirling calyx of fabric.

Dance's most intriguing aspect was watching the impact of Sperling's actions on the production of the images. Beyond walking, running and some skips, there were practically no steps. Since her arms and the rod extensions moved inside the cape, you couldn't quite tell what she was doing. So the constantly changing images came as surprises. The fabric extended the body's kinesphere in unexpected ways so cause and effect relationships did not seem to apply despite the fact that the laws of physics—gravity, energy transfer, decay—were fully operational. Rarely does one see such a clear distinction between the dance and the dancer. At times Sperling looked like a puppeteer or magician who brought to life inanimate things which then acquired a life of their own. In best mythological tradition, she got engulfed and obliterated by her own creation.

Sperling had also made the point that Fuller's work was inspired by skirt dancing, a popular form of parlor entertainment and also commonly performed in variety shows of the time. Seeing *Dance* performed live, one was struck by how its surging energy, the large scale use of space and its direct address to the audience was reminiscent of the can-can dances in places like Les Follies Bergeres. It is no surprise that Fuller was a much welcomed act in that famous boite de nuit.

Since the late 19th century had a love affair with Asia—though primarily Japan—it might be interesting to find out to what extent, if any, the Chinese ribbon dance, and to a lesser extent Korean mourning dances, might have exerted an influence on Fuller's imagination. Some of *Dance's* vertical and symmetrical serpentine bore a striking similarity to ribbon dancing which, of course, is also performed by hand-held rods attached to fabric.