

June 07, 2017

## Pliable Iron

"Precarious"

Hope Mohr Dance

CounterPulse

San Francisco, CA

June 1, 2017

by Rita Felciano

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Choreographer/dancer Hope Mohr started making intellectually challenging work from the moment she moved back to her hometown, San Francisco. That was ten years ago, after she had performed for both Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown and acquired a law degree. Mohr manages to convey emotional and socio-political contents that just ride underneath the surface of a rigorous vocabulary that suggests but doesn't spell out. In "Precarious," her latest work for four women and two men, she brought together two different worlds: an old-fashioned sense of craftsmanship -- hands-on type of work -- with an industrialized way of making something, almost devoid of human interaction: the building of San Francisco's downtown sky scrapers. The piece was propelled by the closing of Klockar's Blacksmith Shop, the last of its kind in San Francisco. Surrounded by ever-rising skylines, it had survived since 1912. The temptation to go nostalgic about a place that may have shod horses and fixed wagon wheels must have been tremendous. Hope didn't go there. But neither did she quite succeed in suggesting how her slickly clad dancers -- in shiny black leotards -- were a response to a world now gone, however you want to define it. The word "Original" was written and erased on a wall. Because "Precarious" is and isn't original?

*Dancer Jane Selna in "Precarious" Photo: Margo Moritz*

"Precarious" profited greatly from David Szlasa's video design which included downtown cranes and skeleton high rises with blurry videos of Klockar's workshop in which shadowy dancers moved around like ghosts or perhaps memories of this now sooty, crowded place. The excellent sound score by Theodore J.H. Hulsker included verbal fragments, industrial sounds from which arose at some point melodious woodwinds. It featured also featured some jaunty jazz riffs -- a memory, a mockery?

"Precarious" opened with a male dancer in a protective work suit methodically sweeping a pile of "coal" to the sides of the stage to make a performance space. The pacing was leisurely but also implied doing a thorough job. Two women, clad in similar suits that they gradually shed, emerged from the darkness, wafting, stretching and balancing arms across their chests. But as they backed up, they stumbled and their places were taken by the women in stretch lycra.

As the dancers took turns shooting out of and disappearing through black openings it felt almost serendipitous. Maybe they stood for the unearthed but fleeting memories that Mohr alluded to in the program notes' quote from author James E. Young: "how does one remember an absence? By reproducing it." Pulls, torques, whipping motion against slow ones, off-balances and staying rooted on your toes, often seemed externally imposed. Deep back bends and ground-hugging pliés, an accelerating turn blossoming into a pirouette and long stretches morphing into arabesques highlighted Mohr's wonderfully inclusive approach towards the dancing body.

Yet, I am not sure whether her choreography communicated a perspective on the precariousness of -- what? Memories?

Security? Still, watching these beautiful dancers -- Tara McArthur, Suzette Sagisi, Jane Selna and Karla Quintero -- offered pleasures of their own. Towards the end the men (Patrick Barnes and Wiley Naman Strasser) tried to crawl from two into one overall. To share what? They looked like lost fumblers.

PS. Klockar's Blacksmith shop will be resurrected as a medical Marijuana dispensary.

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