

May 31, 2015

Two Ways of Shaping

"Stay," "The Material of Attention"

Hope Mohr Dance

ODC Theater

San Francisco, CA

May 28, 2015

by Rita Felciano

copyright by Rita Felciano, 2015



Patrick Barnes and James Graham in "Stay." Photo © by Margo Moritz.

It's, perhaps, not surprising that Hope Mohr, a former student of Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown and Margaret Jenkins, brings a rigorous conceptual approach to her dance making. Both of her new works, "Stay", a quintet inspired by the painter Francis Bacon, and "The Material of Attention," co-directed by Mohr and choreographer/dancer Christian Burns, ask fundamental questions about the body in space and time. One is choreographed; the other is an improvisation within given parameters.

Mohr has said that "Stay" was influenced by her reaction to Bacon's canvasses that elicit strong responses without a narrative. "I want to show that in the context of abstract art there can be emotional connection -- among dancers, and between performers

and audience," she has said. I am not sure whether in terms of dance this can be done. Perhaps Mohr set herself an impossible task. Yet in the process she created a beautifully layered work with some of the Bay Area's individually strongest dancers.

While music and painting can be abstract, or at least approach that state, I don't think dance can. Whether it is Balanchine or Childs, the human body is always present in the dance, and the body is never abstract. In order to communicate through dance, of course, you do not need narrative, plot or character but the minute you put a human being on stage, there is a weight to it -- I like to call it "a story". When Michael Galloway entered in "Stay" with short clipped phrases, finger snaps and head bobs, interjected with short pauses, I saw Hope's shaping hands, but also saw a young, slender male in action. Did he seem lost? Curious? I couldn't tell but the question lingered.

No matter the theory behind "Stay", the work communicated strongly through the precision and intricacy of its intriguing imagery and the elegance of its shifting stage pictures, much enhanced by David Szlasa's color-saturated lighting design. A movable light bulb arrow evinced strong directionality; it acted as a commentary on the dance.

There were moments when, aligned against one of the wall, some the dancers seemed frozen in fear. Uncertainty, in a hunched shoulder or backward glance, seemed to course through the piece. Galloway blankly looking at us sported a long tail -- James Graham and Patrick Barnes slithering along the floor behind him. In a duet of wide stances and hip rolls, lunges and reaches and

mirroring images the very differently trained Tegan Schwab and Lindsey Renee Derry attempted, and almost succeeded in, synchronicity.

Perhaps most stunning was the repeated pairing of Graham and Barnes, the former moving smooth as silk against Barnes' muscular weight. Barnes threw himself into space and onto the floor with all his force and yet appeared in total control. Graham on cat's paws slithered and turned his body every way as if its constituent parts moved independently. Sidling up to Barnes he made contact with his sense of smell, and they engaged each other playfully in hand-over-hand encounters.

"Material" turned out to be splendid sextet with an intricate patchwork score by Szlasa, interspersed with long periods of silence when you became aware of the sounds of bodies in motion. Szlasa included among borrowed musical samples, electronica, fragmentary observations from Burns and Hope and a mysterious concoction of bells above animal grunts. Most intriguingly, a recurring telephone message from gallery owner Paule Anglim asked to be called. Anglim died this past April, so whence that voice and request to talk?

In the opening passage "Material" felt almost like a playground, such was the ease with which these dancers (Aidan DeYoung, Graham, Peiling Kao, Murphy, Schwab and Megan Wright) took to space at top energy level but without interfering with each other. The whole piece highlighted the individuality and similarity of these performers even as it showcased the many different ways dancers give and take. At one point V-form arms looked funny, elegant and hesitant. A line of outstretched hands connected the dancers precariously. A common weight shift -- and its mutations -- recalled a boxer's stance. In one duet one dancer dove into another couple, and all of a sudden you had a pile of performers in front of you. Right before the end, stage left, it sure looked as if the dancers were attempting a mosh pit -- gentle, funny, but still. . .

The extensive use of duets -- so varied, so clear and so fluid -- reminded me that a colleague once observed that contact improv was her favorite form of dance watching. "Material" was more than that, but my friend would have loved it.