

### Theory and Practice: Hope Mohr Dance, Reviewed

By Irene Hsiao  
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*Photo by Margo Moritz*

San Francisco's Hope Mohr Dance premiered *Failure of the Sign* is the Sign at ODC Theater May 3-5, along with a work by New York-based choreographer Susan Rethorst. The set design by Katrina Rodabaugh is extraordinary: Strung from the ceiling are jagged branches hung with exposed incandescent light bulbs, soft sculptures in soft blue in the shapes

of a castle on a planet, trees sprouting from a whale, and organs, soft organs: lungs, heart, pancreas. Tegan Schwab, swaddled in long blue tubes, rolls fetally, larvally, the tips of her fingers and toes making light contact with the bare wood floor.

David Schlieffers enters, clutching a pillow. Katharine Hawthorne stares up at a bright light. The six dancers proceed with the hunger and animal investigation of children, test gravity with repeated jumps, wrap themselves in the soft blue shapes, try out their voices with monosyllables, then repeatedly group themselves into tense sculptures that strain the limits of the arms and legs to hold ("Form is different than feeling," says the voice on the soundtrack, a long poem written by Mohr cut in with voices singing in clear tones, children babbling, the oceanic swish of the intestines).

"Language: the skin of the mind," the voice says, condensing Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan. The dancers recreate the contact between Adam and God, evolve through stages of uprightness, attempt supported flight. The others utter gutturals while Schwab explodes through an astonishing solo that mimics the way sounds deform space. The stage periodically grows dark, which might indicate time passing or reproduce a primal voracity for aural sensation ("Metaphor causes the mind to experience itself, making a mistake").

The dancers tussle and cradle each other, contract in undefined seizures of emotion. They slap their hands against their torsos, lay hands on each other like stethoscopes listening for irregularities of the pulse. It's abstract and confusing, the way theorists try to redefine language, the way memories and feelings are indistinct when we have no names for them, the way the body is frustrated from ever being another body. Breath voiced is speech or song; onstage, it is a signal to move or stop; the rapid breaths of dancers in sanctioned exhaustion close the piece -- at last, a unison.

As a contrast to Mohr's piece, Rethorst's Behold Bold Sam Dog is the flip side of the struggle for meaning. The piece denies all forms of satisfaction, featuring Mohr and Katie Faulkner in something like a duet in which they don't really interact but don't really not interact, either. Mohr traces out Faulkner's silhouette. Faulkner traces space with a squiggle of her thumbs. Bursts of Shostakovich's second waltz are piped in and then abruptly cease, leaving the dancers with a vacant silence. Eight dancers gesture, alone and together, sometimes begin and then drop away. The Beatles sing

"Come Together," but the piece doesn't want to, until a last minute solo by the deft Faulkner hints at the treat we watchers slaver after: a little song and dance number.