



Hope Mohr Dance Examines a Changing Landscape

BY HEATHER DESAULNIERS

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"Precarious" hones in on changing times.

Photos: Margo Moritz

On an unusually warm San Francisco afternoon, I visited Hope Mohr Dance in rehearsal on their latest piece, "Precarious." The company members invited me to sit with them as they worked through a text script that is part of the upcoming mixed-discipline performance. Together, the six-member ensemble enunciated a single word—"originally." They said the word repeatedly, each performer tasting and experiencing the sound of it. The repetition served as both emphatic and calming. When the chorus of "originallys" was complete, the cast moved onto other parts of the text.

As the day went on, I kept thinking of that word, "originally," and what it means. A beginning. A starting point. An initial intention. And I thought of origin stories that stem from more than just one moment or one event, like a woven tapestry of interrelated fibers. "Precarious," which premieres in June as part of Hope Mohr Dance's 10th anniversary season, falls into this category.

Conceived by artistic director Mohr, the roots of "Precarious" grew in different ways. One way was Mohr's desire to push boundaries and move outside comfort zones in her work. "...for our 10th anniversary, I had no interest in looking back and doing repertory," Mohr says. "'Precarious' reflects my ongoing commitment to challenge myself to work in new ways." To that end, Mohr sought an alternative space for the piece, something beyond the typical dance studio setting. "I wanted to work in a site-specific way to encourage a mode of making that was responsive to a particular environment," she says. She was drawn to the Klockar's Blacksmith Shop on Folsom Street in San Francisco's South Beach district. Mohr had history at Klockar's. "For a couple of years, I had had an improvisation practice there with my friend, painter Tracy Taylor Grubbs, whose studio is on the second floor," she explains. "I fell in love with the space and wanted to create something inspired by the building."

Mohr dove into the creative phase last fall. Then circumstances forced an unforeseen turn of events. "We started working there before the election," she explains. "The day after the election, we learned that the building was being converted into a marijuana dispensary and that Tracy was being evicted." The company held one performance in the original space before the eviction deadline, but after that Mohr had to seek out additional venues both for rehearsals and for the performance of the final piece. Though she managed to

navigate this unexpected shift, she notes that her company's dilemma was indicative of "the displacement epidemic and the loss of historic and artist spaces in the city."

It was important to Mohr to hold onto Klockar's sense of place as "Precarious" moved forward. In the choreography, one sees subtle mechanical and mechanized motifs, reminiscent not only the machinery and tools of blacksmithing, but also the work it entailed. Additional text segments include history, chronological events and personal reflections, language that helps set the scene and provide narrative framing. For visual context, Mohr brought two new collaborators on board. "...to create an environment, David Szlasa is designing video for the piece that draws on footage we shot during our process inside Klockar's as well as still images by photographer Margo Moritz, also of the blacksmith shop," Mohr says.

And Mohr has found another way to connect "Precarious" and Klockar's. Hope Mohr Dance has partnered with Shaping San Francisco Walking Tours to offer an optional preshow labor history walking tour before its Friday and Saturday performances, titled "Working Bodies." "It begins at Klockar's Blacksmithing Shop at 443 Folsom and traverses the South of Market neighborhood to end up near CounterPulse, where the performance will be held. The tour discusses the labor history of San Francisco and offers performances by the Community Music Center's Aquatic Park Senior Choir and an art installation by Jean Pettigrew Whelan. Mohr explains that "the tour will serve as a historical and social framework for the dance, which is abstract. I want people to know the story behind the abstraction."

June 1-3

CounterPulse

80 Turk St.*

www.hopemohr.org

*Optional walking tour 4:30-6:30 pm Friday & Saturday