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Photo: Mascher Space Cooperative

Coalescing in Context: Movement Sound Experiment at Mascher

by Kat J. Sullivan

Mascher Space Cooperative is hot. What under normal circumstances might feel stifling feels warm and luxurious on a biting cold January Friday. Despite the fact that the invite for this performance described it as “impromptu,” Mascher is simmering with audience members. We all flit between the rows of blue theater chairs, greeting and meeting under the glow of the lights. It’s pleasant.

A half hour later, when the performance is well under way, the space is entirely different; bodies rushing the space, devouring it with outstretched fingers and bounding leaps, bodies thrumming on instruments. Movement Sound Experiment, organized by Philly-based improvisational guitarist Tim Motzer and facilitated by improvisational mover Curt Haworth, pairs musicians and dancers for about an hour’s worth of free improvisational performance. Drummer Tobias Ralph and Motzer station themselves stage right and provide the sound-scape for the evening. Unlike some improvisational sound-making which can be cacophonous and random (not always a detracting factor in the experience!), Ralph and Motzer weave percussion on drums and metals with cinematic melodies on the guitar, sometimes reaching an all-encompassing volume, to create driven and intense sound. I appreciate the solidness of Motzer and Ralph’s score: it feels tethered to the thrumming aesthetic rather than bouncing from one unrelated idea to another.

I find improvisational movement harder to describe than choreography because it stems more from the creator’s internal experience of the moment and less from a place of displaying a pre-determined concept. It is often more subtle and finite, more ephemeral. The group, including Nicole Diaz-Pellot, Leanne Grieger, Loren Groenendaal, Katarina Poljak, Katherine Keifer Stark, Zach Svoboda, and Savannah Vawter, sweep the stage in duos, trios, and as a full ensemble.

Most of the movement, to my surprise, is full-bodied and dynamic; to my even greater surprise, I like it. Improvised dance that is vigorous often seems to devolve into tricks and showiness, forsaking any authenticity in the movement. Not so with the dancers here. As the dancers fall to the floor, take a running slide onto the floor and use the momentum to send themselves in circles suspended on their sacrum, and jog in circles, it feels entirely true to the work. Indeed, when the piece finds moments of pause, they are breathtaking.

The entire group sits on the floor, just past the pillar in the middle of Mascher's space, lifting up and gently passing along a procumbent Svoboda. Grieger and Vawter, towards the end of a duet, sit on their knees and observe the musicians for a few seconds, maybe a minute, before drifting offstage in conclusion of the work.

Abstract images and patterns, created by an artist named syd, are projected onto the far wall. Engaging in their own right, they interacted interestingly with the shadows of the movers and helped to coalesce the aesthetic in a rare way for improvisational performance.

Returning to the pleasant state that we started with in Mascher allowed me to reflect on how much I appreciated that all artists sensed and committed to the aesthetic of the overall work that was emerging. Though I enjoy the raucousness that free improvisation can invoke, the patterns and places of synchronicity of Movement Sound Experiment gave the evening a sense of unity; not that the artists were all doing the same thing, but they were each doing their thing in the same world.

Movement Sound Experiment, Tim Motzer and Curt Haworth, Mascher Space Cooperative, Jan 11.

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