

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: John Kane

Moving Toward Meaning

By Whitney Weinstein

Pilobolus Dance Theatre rolled and contorted its way into Philadelphia with a different type of show than usually presented. Although this Connecticut-based company has a reputation for playful shape-shifting, a more serious mood was introduced through movement which seemed to reflect on humanistic connections. The group's reputation for astounding physical strength was consistently evident, yet the flawless transitions made me think more deeply about how relationships are formed – within both a personal and general context.

Upon entering the theater the show seemed to have already begun. The audience watched in silence as the flexible dancers twisted through their warm-up routines, moving like rare creatures through seemingly unreal manipulations.

Azimuth, choreographed only last year, used metal arcs that, when held on each end by a dancer's outstretched arms, created a curve barely above his or her head. The silver prop contrasted with and paralleled the bending spines of dancers who spiraled the arcs around their bodies. Twirling in and out of unison, the company bobbed the arcs up and down through the space, gently shifting angles to form moment after moment of remarkable visual images.

During this piece, however, deeper content was reflected through the almost hypnotic displays. A woman, lying down, balanced a red ball between her forehead and nose, then carefully made her way to standing, so as not to drop her prop. She engaged within her kinesphere, regarding only herself and the ball. Another dancer then attempted to capture the round object for himself. Dancers shifted ownership of the ball through discrete turns and aggressive snatching, bringing out Pilobolus' admirable playfulness. The two began to interact, sharing personal space as they frolicked with the ball. The upbeat exchanges and use of the ball evoked youthful play as the two main characters spun from each other's momentum into a dream world reminiscent of first love.

Intimacy appeared to engulf the entangled couple when they leaned into an abrupt moment of confrontation. The company created a

whirlwind around them, adding chaos to their stillness. A white ball replaced the red as the duet was framed by two arcs creating a circle. The white ball in the midst of the circle suggested purity and union. With a newfound sense of fragility, the two dancers willingly alternated possession of the ball through the contours of their bodies. At first a symbol of common infatuation, the ball transformed into the lovers' shared responsibility, their earlier light-heartedness shifting to a deeper connection.

For the remainder of the evening, videos alternated with live dance, all continuing to challenge physical boundaries and relationships. Many of the short films revealed parallels between technology and nature. In one film cells divided and reproduced, creating a sense of traffic on the screen; the next image showed traffic at a busy city intersection. The patterns were similar, organic. Discovering those similarities introduced unity between two perspectives so drastically different. The concluding dance, *Automaton*, explored technology's impact on an individual's humanity, emphasizing an overarching theme of connection.

Pilobolus continues to push physical limitations and explore their capabilities in group work. The company astonished spectators with the intensity and emotion of the performance, as well as with the dancers' acrobatic feats: the audience's initial silence erupted into exclamations of awe preceding the standing ovation that greeted the dancers' bows. After 42 years, Pilobolus continues to astound with sublime visuals and highly emotional themes.

Pilobolus Dance Theater, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Zellerbach Theater, January 17-20, 2012,
<http://danceaffiliates.org/dance-celebration.php#page-top>.

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