

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Cross-Country Diving with SCUBA

by Beau Hancock

It is tough for emerging, even mid-career, choreographers to tour their work. The challenges of securing support, audiences, and venues keep many dance-makers within regional centers. For the past seven years, Philadelphia Dance Projects has presented SCUBA, a national network enabling selected choreographers from Seattle, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia to exhibit their work in several of these cities. The most recent Philadelphia installment brought together local artist Gabrielle Revlock with San Francisco-based choreographer Holly Johnston and her Ledges and Bones Dance Project.

Revlock's solo *Halo*, set to a score by frequent collaborator Jacob Mitas, felt like a duet-- with a hula-hoop as partner. Clad in a simple white dress, Revlock entered with hoop in hand as the first luscious tones of Mitas' solo violin score were heard. She then, and ceaselessly for the rest of the dance, passed the hoop through every navigable surface of her body. In one particularly moving moment, she tilted drastically to her right, widening her legs, reaching her arms out and slowly folding them in, while adjusting her waist incrementally to keep the hoop aloft.

It isn't just Revlock's skill that created interest within passages like this, but her bold framing of particular images. Her left arm reaching high with the hoop slowly circulating around a single palm provided a moment of respite before she dove through the space, running with the hoop and leaping to the ground. It is this sense of pacing that impressed me most about *Halo*. Revlock's thoughtful construction of each action coupled with her assured, doe-eyed presence lent an affecting quality to these almost task-based phrases.

Revlock's second offering of the evening, a video co-created with Bonnie Friel and entitled *Do You See What I See?*, was originally developed as a companion piece to her stage-based work *SHARE!*. In it, the narrator remarked, "I want to share something with you," and the five performers make various "binoculars" or "masks" with their hands, awkwardly twisting their fingers around their eyes. The charm and absurdity of it made me curious about connections with the live performance.

Holly Johnston filled *WANT*, the last work of the evening, with non-stop athletic and dexterous dancing. Her five-person cast moved full throttle through demanding material and liquid partnering to a collagist score of ambient and classical tracks. While *WANT* brimmed with

virtuosity, such as an explosive leap that landed on the shin, I was more attracted to the subtle textures: a slow, serpentine unfolding of the spine from a squat to standing with the dancer perched high on the balls of the feet, or a recurring motif of picking at another dancer's shirt as if obsessively cleaning away lint. I left craving more of these understated touches.

Working with several video artists, Johnston developed an interactive video for *WANT* that ran concurrently with the dance, which she describes as being, "programmed to follow and respond to the dancers." I didn't see this relationship. And while the video offered a few magical moments (an underwater world with bodies floating in the aquamarine depths, a harried dinner table scene with the performers folding and falling into each other), I found it largely forgettable, and the split focus required to follow both Johnston's intricate choreography and the indistinct screen images proved challenging. This is why I was stirred by the final image: the video and sound fades away, the performers turned to face the audience, their gasping breath clearly audible, their gazes searching the faces in the blackened house, and we (the audience and the performers) were left with that moment together to simply breathe.

SCUBA, Holly Johnston's *Ledges and Bones Dance Project* and Gabrielle Revlock, *Conwell Dance Theater*, March 16- 17. No further performances. www.scubadance.us.

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