

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Sharvon P. Urbannavage

Facing Off at Jumpstart

by Lisa Kraus

The proportions of a baby's face—big eyes, rosebud mouth—are calibrated to promote survival. They're just so cute, we *have* to take care of them.

How performers use their faces can determine whether we connect with them or not, or feel engaged by the art they share with us. At *Jumpstart*, the new Live Arts* initiative showcasing pieces in distinct genres of physical theater, dance theater and "pure" dance, a viewer could see gradations in how the face is used in each performing genre to draw the viewer in or keep them at arm's length.

In The Brothers Beffa's episodic vignettes titled *Lessons for the Lobotomized*, Justin Rose and Scott Sheppard portray a dazed, bug-eyed mental patient and a maniacal Germanic shrink in Le Corbusier spectacles. Their faces convey disgust, distress, confusion, triumph. We look at how they look at each other, at us. Their master-slave dynamic, not unlike *Waiting for Godot's*, is absurd: the shrink gives lessons in combing hair and in singing to the lobotomized patient who has a stake stuck in his brain and blood spattering his clothes.

Their storytelling was the most conventionally structured in *Jumpstart*. And along with carefully choreographed physicality—a kick in the groin, a mechanized walk, a posture connoting defeat—much of the action was on their faces with changing displays of emotions and reactions. The audience was totally tickled.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, least animated in the use of the face were two dances seemingly connected to underlying narrative content, but without cues making that readable to this viewer. Seeing these dances in the context of *Jumpstart's* mixed genres brought home how dancers have to work extra-hard to achieve a fullness and rigor that trumps our impulse to look for literal meaning.

The Naked Stark (Katherine Keifer Stark, Wilson Stern and Barbara Tait) performs *Looking for Judy* with neutral, blank faces and without looking directly at us or each other while dancing. Contrasted with the in-your-face buffoonery of the Beffas, they appear unsure.

The three dancers in varying combinations manipulate plywood rectangles braced to provide upright planes against which they press, walk sideways or suspend themselves off the ground while in contact with a partner. The dancing is playful, loping, with weight swooping into one-handed balances or rolling over a partner's back. But the tone is curiously ominous as a buzzer interrupts the action repeatedly, the scene is rearranged and a new piece of music and new configuration of dancers and set elements signal yet another beginning.

Jessica Morgan obscures her face totally in the solo *Dress and Disappearance*. With shoulder-length hair hanging in front of her eyes at all times except when her head is thrown back, we're unable to make out her features. She telegraphs the mixed message "look at me/don't look at me." Morgan's buffeted body zigzags in waves through a shadowy-lit stage, bearing a resemblance to the flattened style of '20s and '30s dancers with flexed elbows and wrists. Deliberately obscured, this dance is a mystery for viewers to solve. But offering few clues, it came across as solipsistic rather than something to be shared.

The phenomenon of performers intentionally not showing their faces has some interesting recent history. Earlier this spring at the LAB Luciana Achugar showed her newest work with its four performers' faces veiled by knee-length, dark wigs. Trisha Brown created her solo *If You Couldn't See Me* after Robert Rauschenberg challenged her to create a dance where she never faces the audience. Both of these works capitalize to the fullest on their shared conceit. In a related way, masked dances exist in many traditions; the impulse to shift how the audience reads/can't read the face is beguiling.

Western dance has a historical tradition of a particular kind of mask—a facial neutrality that stretches back to Cunningham. Judith Dunn, a former Cunningham dancer and wife of the Judson mentor Robert Dunn, admonished me in the '70s to "say it with my body rather than my face." With the postmodernists' emphasis on an offhand performing style, the tradition of "faceless" dancing has continued. But if the performer is "inviting being seen" to borrow Deborah Hay's term, is this default performing style a sensible convention? The Cunningham and post-modern camps made a blank face part of the "no to spectacle" era when reacting to the turgid emotional intensity of the moderns. But today, in our era of pluralism and multiplicity, the full range of presentational possibilities is available to dancers. With permission to make use of any and all strategies, "blankness" should be a conscious choice, clearly deliberate, and appropriate to the show.

Jumpstart's three "dance theater" offerings presented performers looking out at the audience and speaking to them directly with engaging, responsive, communicative faces.

Sahar Javedani has an important story to tell. An Iranian woman who has lived for many years in the U.S., her *In the Middle, somewhat aggravated* reflects our stereotypes about veiled women and refers to Javedani's being neither fully American nor fully Iranian. She begins firmly in the physical, hands curling like smoke, hair whipping like a dagger slice, letting her generous figure settle like molten lava as her feet pad downward. Then she switches performing modes, looking at us and saying "I love America" multiple times in an emotional range morphing from boosterish to desperate. Finally she holds up a laptop displaying images of veiled women and explains matter-of-factly, "I am just like you" as though speaking for all the women pictured. Sometimes the activities she describes enjoying—going to the beach, smoking, going shopping—are familiar, and sometimes the opposite: "I know to stand behind my husband." It's a multi-stranded portrayal, not simple.

Jamarr Hall in *Dirt Roads* bounced back and forth between the characters of a toothless old man mouthing his dentureless gums to an exuberant young one, eyes open with mirth, with disbelief, with terror. This is a gifted and powerful young performer whose story of remembered love and violence could use more dramaturgical clarity, but whose presence is commanding, not least because of his pliable, extremely expressive face.

The tag line for Jumpstart "showcasing the next wave of live performance" was borne out with extreme, zany promise in *A Brief Contemplation* by Ilse Zoerb. Standing at a lectern, addressing us directly, the unprepossessing Zoerb launches into a series of scenes poking serious fun at discrimination against women by delivering a speech on sexism and inserting the word "cunt" wherever it fits: "Do

not be content until there is consistent gender equality.” She then says that she was never prey to penis envy, but rather wished for a beard. Stepping away from the lectern to expose her naked lower half, she proceeds to create a face using googly stick-on eyes and lipstick and neatly twisting her pubic hair into a mustache and goatee. Her beard indeed! As if that weren’t side-splitting enough, she dons a purpose-built costume, a kind of ball gown for that lower face with a second set of arms, and proceeds to do a soft shoe to “Honey Pie”—a sweetly choreographed divertissement for a girl and her face/snatch.

Jumpstart, Live Arts Studio, May 31-June 2.

*The Live Arts Brewery is a thINKingDANCE partner, hosting meetings with writers and guest teachers.

By Lisa Kraus

June 9, 2012