

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Steve Fox Photography

Listening for Histories

by Carolyn Merritt

Shiloh Baptist Church, an architectural and historical treasure, lies on Christian between 20th and 21st Streets. In this neighborhood, alternately known as Graduate Hospital, Southwestern Center City, and South of South Street, flags celebrate famed singer Marian Anderson, shiny modern constructions interrupt two- and three-story brownstones, and one of the city's few American elms survives. Originally the Church of the Apostles, the building's congregation peaked at 10,000 in the early 1900s. Acquired by Shiloh in 1945, its second incarnation once boasted 3,000 congregants. Today, it is spiritual home to 200.

Inside, Furness brick imagery, stained glass, and pipe organs meet dust-covered floors, chipped white walls bubbling under water stains, and bald light bulbs hung from lonely-looking cords. Upstairs, a basketball net, plastic wading pools, wooden lockers, and attendance registers suggest a former school. Downstairs, scaffolding and signs reveal the kind of new life not uncommon in U.S. churches, JUNK Dance and Brat Theater Productions.

Upon arrival we're split in two groups, led to a room on the first or second floor, reassured we'll switch halfway through and won't miss anything. On the second floor, Gabrielle Revlock and David Konyk fly, roll and suspend around, atop and under a sturdy wooden table, while Germaine Ingram and Michelle Tantoco brush, slap and tap ground, tabletop and rusty lampshades, extracting sounds they punctuate with vocalizations. Revlock unearths a hymnbook and Tantoco purifies the air with some sort of holy spigot. Sarah Cunningham's viola and voice travel through walls from an adjacent room. She's out of sight save for our entry and exit; framed by a south-facing window, she glows more brightly on our departure, a spirit awash in the late afternoon sun.

Back on the ground floor, bells clang and a violin responds as Diane Monroe enters, conjuring other stories to life. Leah Stein emerges from beneath a pile of upside-down tables, her loose hands flapping the skybound table legs. Bounding from one end of the room to another, she ambles aloft tables and along a prone ladder, tracing objects and etching patterns in the air. Evaporating as they appear, these patterns draw our attention to dust particles in flight, shifts of light through colored glass and fabrics, the slow fade of day to dusk

– the pulsing life in emptiness.

If places speak to us, they can also speak through us.

United on the first floor, Stein's crew raise, turn, and reground curving mahogany pews before us. I see the work of establishing and resettling a congregation, the changing fabric of a neighborhood, cultural shifts in urban America. As the music fades, the performers invite us to the pews.

We sit, wait, and listen.

Adjacent Spaces (2013 Fringe Festival) ,[Leah Stein Dance Company](http://leahsteindance.com/), Shiloh Baptist Church, September 14, 15 & 21 2pm & 5pm.
<http://fringearts.ticketleap.com/adjacent-spaces/>

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