

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Brian Mengini

Eye of the Storm

by Carolyn Merritt

Seated in a chair, her back and right profile to us, eyes closed, hands palm down in a gesture of grounding, Awilda Sterling Duprey is a lesson in stillness. Amidst the quiet storm of our movement in and out of the entryway behind her, our hugs, chit-chat, settling of bags, coats, selves, and nervous energy of anticipation, she waits. Rooted, deep, solid; (the illusion of) permanence.

With a glance back over her shoulder, her body and its wisdom forecasts something we can't yet see. White and rose sheets hang from a clothesline that extends across the stage, emanating sunshine, warmth. Another time and place. Prudence Amsden, Enya-Kalia Jordan, Graciella Maiolatesi, and Rachel Repinz circle one another in neutral harem jumpsuits. They clap, slap, and stomp at one another, smiling and gesturing for more, etching rhythms into their bodies that echo out into the space and land in ours. Joy, communion, and color arise from the rhythms, from the competitive camaraderie underlying their creation. A lesson in physics, in the generative force of energy, they showcase the something that emerges from what, at first glance, appears as nothing.

Sterling Duprey crawls on all fours towards center stage, pausing to look back along the way. Her feet ignite with the sounds of Jonathan Suazo's jazz, in a back and forth exchange with the ground below. Painting rhythms with her limbs, her shoulders lift and roll, arms swoop and curve, while fingers point and punctuate the play of sound and movement. From behind the sheets, Marion Ramírez peaks and disappears, her round belly and the growing life within never fully receding from view. Beneath the sheets, we spy her feet, admire the gentle poetry of their heel-toe, toe-heel articulations. In a playful duet, she sends the fabric billowing aloft, rippling outward like water, until it whips in the winds of a brewing storm and collapses overhead as she takes cover.

Evoking Oyá, Yoruba goddess of winds, storm, and lightning, a twirling Ama Gora appears in a video projected onto the sheets and the backdrop, the picture split, multiplying itself. Winds howl as her red head-wrap slowly morphs into a giant meteorological satellite image. It is gorgeous, captivating, this pulsing message of impending doom.

Images of Hurricane Maria and its aftermath flash across the backdrop, set incongruously against the moody, romantic saxophone of

Miguel Zénon's "Incomprendido." Cars float by along a street-turned-river; a purple haze fills the sky; trees sway and buck at angles more appropriate to fairy tales; a man sits amidst the rubble of a house, not a single beam standing.

So familiar as story, the devastation is distant, an image on a screen. It conjures the imperialist distance muddying our ties to the island of Puerto Rico, informing the confused rhetoric of difference: a separation transcending geography. Within the darkened theater, it recalls the absurdist tv reality of our daily national nightmare even as it summons previous disasters, the catastrophe of non-response, horror of selective disregard.

Sterling Duprey rises from these images, her rescue worker headlamp cutting a path through the darkened stage. Strobe lights and circling flashlights heighten the terror of disaster and confusion of survival, while a moving mirror reflects back our inability to turn away, our fascination with watching.

In the eye of the storm, all is calm. But like all things inevitable, true, we feel its approach, *our bodies know*, if we remain open to the rhythms of energy. Around me, the signs mount: the ground crumbles amidst a growing network of sinkholes; rainfall and caterpillars approach biblical levels; colonies of the dispossessed multiply; the walking dead alight on my doorstep. The powers that be rail with a fury that only elevates the righteousness of mounting rage.

A symbol of feminine power, Oya represents both obliteration and, in its wake, renewal. *Ojalá* that she rains down redemption soon.

[Lacks Criticality](#), Awilda Sterling Duprey, Temple University Reflection:Response Commission 2018, Conwell Dance Theater, September 21-22.

By Carolyn Merritt
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