

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lance Lake

## Intimate Spaces

by Mohan Bell

pitch (a dance co.)\* showcased two works in progress at an intimate performance at the Painted Bride: Tania Isaac's *any.body.here* and Gabri Christa's *Magdalena*. These pieces, though created as stand-alones, worked well together in exploring how our experience in the human body is affected by our encounters with other bodies. *any.body.here* was a manifesto that used economical, direct language to exemplify that we, as humans, have no right to impose on the freedom of another person's body. *Magdalena* used movement, film, and narrative to tell the story of how trauma affected Christa's mother, Magdalena, leading to dementia in her old age.

Isaac performed on a small stage made from a separate built-out platform. (She mentioned in the talkback after the show that she actually wanted to dance on a table, but that idea did not work.) Weaving together movement with simple poetry and nursery rhymes, she demonstrated the balancing act we play each day to fit into societal norms. She did this though the image of an imaginary puddle, lamenting, in sing song-y verses reminiscent of nursery rhymes, her attempts to balance herself and not fall in. Coupled with her poetry/manifesto on the need to respect all bodies, the puddle image became about the precipice we balance ourselves along. Her aim, as she explained in the talk back after the show, was to speak for all marginalized groups who find their bodies imposed upon by other bodies and powers. That would seem ambitious, because a lot of groups feel this way. I noted that she chose to include movements and poses that are usually culturally associated with black women: hands on hips akimbo as if in conversation, leaning back with her hands in the crook of her back as if tired from hard work. When asked about that in the talk back, she said that she had made the choice for some time to include her identity as a black Caribbean woman into her dance. Many other everyday movements were included as well—movements that we would not necessarily associate with modern dance such as jogging and other workout routines.

Isaac intertwined her legs continuously, creating tension and giving me the sense that her body was being bound. During the talkback, one audience member mentioned that the stage light fragmented her legs. She also wore a neckpiece that was reminiscent of a chain, bringing to mind captivity and bondage. When she read her poetry, she spoke directly to the need for respect and compassion for all

bodies. Thus, Isaac was able to accomplish her goal: making a universal statement by putting herself on display while calling attention to how all bodies are to be respected. For me, that was the power of the piece: its ability to be intimate while speaking for many.

Gabri Christa began her piece by telling the story of how her mother came into possession of a black doll: the same black doll that sat center stage atop a suitcase, in a small, makeshift stage defined by a perimeter of lights on the regular dance floor. Her mother was born and raised in the Netherlands. This piece explored memory and trauma and their connection to dementia. The black doll represented Magdalena's early memory of surviving a German bombing of her home city, Rotterdam. Christa created a World War II newsreel, splicing together actual footage with a news announcer's voice that narrated the war from the point of view of the child Magdalena, who, being the sole child who survived the bombing, received the doll as a gift. After telling her mother's story and then invoking the physical manifestation of her childhood trauma using stiff and restrictive movements, Christa locked the doll away in a smaller box and placed it into the suitcase. The suitcase was a strong image: Magdalena later relocated to Curacao, after marrying Christa's father. Christa projected pictures onto the lid of the suitcase while telling the postcolonial love story of how her mother met the young, black, handsome man from Curacao. On the island, she learned lessons about race mainly through her work as a teacher. All of these memories were portrayed as trauma. Using pithy language, she defined dementia as having a direct link to the psychological and emotional experience of a person.

Christa played dual roles in the piece. As a storyteller, she narrated her mother's experience. As a dancer, she channeled her mother, her movements showing the physical embodiment of her mother's trauma. From stiff movements reflective of the doll to an animal-like posture and dragging of the feet, which showed the woman that her mother became in her old age as a result of the dementia, she explored how this medical condition matured and evolved as it was left untreated.

A feeling of intimacy was purposefully created in these performances. At the beginning of the show, both dancers mingled with the crowd, talking. The small stages that both performed on invited the audience into something personal and intimate that complimented their goals well. The dancers/choreographers could speak directly to the audience, looking them in the eyes. I felt close to the performers and that built a level of trust in the room. This was the ideal setting to discuss such personal yet universal topics.

*any.body.here/Magdalena*, pitch (a dance co.), The Painted Bride, April 27-28

\* The title of the company is presented as pitch (a dance co.)

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