

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Johanna Austin

Peeking into the Personal

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Sneakers grapples with loss on several levels: the deeply personal heartache of a daughter (Nichole Canuso) grappling with her mother's death, the creative process of building and erasing memories, the task of translating experience into legible art, the presence of an audience whose members carry their own griefs. One spectator, in fact, sobs audibly throughout the show.

That deepest level, the personal heartache, is beyond critique and commentary: the depths of such loss reach back to primal territory. I've been there; perhaps we've all been there, or sense we will be. In bringing up her self, her "I"—and her eye, remembering and reconstructing her childhood home—Canuso embeds her creative process and artmaking in a world so personal that I am not sure how to position my own self as viewer. Can I judge such work? The sobbing audience member presses into that question, rubbing my own wounds.

A nearly bare black-box greets the audience at the start of *Sneakers*. With her words, her actions and postures, her use of masking tape to mark furniture shapes on the floor, her drawing of pathways with chalk, the lighting (by Maria Shaplin), and sound accompaniment (by Michael Kiley), Canuso builds, erases, and reshapes the world of her childhood, what she calls her "time-lapse photo" of home, of her mother's story, of her nursing that mother through her final illness.

A smart mover, Canuso subtly phrases her gestures, some barely indicating a motion, others sweeping her across the space, or down to the floor and up. Gestures and motions spring from her text (her pet guinea pig gets a toothy lip-chomping gesture), from her descriptions (sweeping the edge of an unseen countertop), her adjectives (she sinks when mentioning a room's *drop*-ceiling). As mother's illness progresses, as the unspeakable end approaches, Canuso expresses her anguish by awkwardly dragging the remains of her chalk across the floor with her foot while scooting on her butt, blurring the past she so painstakingly reproduced in previous words and actions.

In this unfolding, directed by Suli Holum, the crafting of the narrative, the questions of memory and loss, and the embodiment of grief all read clearly to me, but they don't reach my own gut. The dominance of words—though beautifully and articulately spoken by Canuso and, through taped interviews, her mother—makes this a story told, more than shown. Canuso has been grappling with this material since 2014, according to her program note; I don't think she's done. In a next iteration, more body, less speaking, please.

[Sneakers](#), Nichole Canuso Dance, Theatre Exile, 2019 Fringe Festival, Sept. 6-10

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