

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lois Greenfield

Leah Stein—Thoughts From The Field

By Anna Drozdowski

The place: The Parlor

The time: 2006

The weather: Slightly sticky

The question: Improvise

The answer: One horizontal pass across the studio. Stage right to left.

The players: Leah & Roko (Like Madonna, they only ever had first names for me.)

The audience: A dozen of us, pressed against the mirror, dwelling in possibility.

The experience: Slack-jawed, I sat, reveling in the ease of their long-term collaborative understanding and delighting in an addictive three-minute dance made for the moment. So much drama unfolded as the simple structure revealed itself and quickly the room and dance came to an end. Gone too soon, but damn, I enjoyed it.

In the 360-degree landscape of Leah Stein Dance Company, I am but a small pebble. Still new to Stein's sculptural studies of bodies in nature, I asked for some help from collaborators representing larger rocks in her life across two decades, three continents and four generations. The response was overwhelming and alive with the texture and easy intuition in Stein's dances. Our living history in dance is a shared one, and in this instance I've decided to play the role of miner; trusting that the many angles offered up will unearth aspects of this multifaceted gem:

Collaborating with Leah is like freedom. We met during a year-long residency at the Community Education Center in Philadelphia in 1986. It was our first real opportunity to develop work. She appeared in my first concert and I recorded the sound score for her first

concert. –S. Ann Alburger

Leah's work shows us our environment anew. Not just the physical aspect of it but also the ghosts and some of the painful stories too. It's always with a light touch and a kind of reverence for everything that's gone before. She makes gorgeous images – people in landscapes, people against building surfaces, people animating space altogether. It's a different way of seeing dance. Dance becomes the activity that brings space to life. There are lots of spaces I pass in our city that retain the stamp of what she created in them. –Lisa Kraus

Working with Leah has a wonderful feeling of exploring all possibilities. It's just like the feeling you had when you were 10 and playing make-believe with your best friend. Thanks, Leah! –Dave Champion

Leah showed up to my choir rehearsal. She asked almost one hundred singers to touch the top of their head and their sacrum during a warm-up. I was impressed! Dancing for Leah is like a camping trip. I always bring my sneakers, sunblock, bug spray, and lots of power bars. I'm never certain what might happen. I could be running through the woods or wading through a pond. –Ellen Gerdes

Who else would dream of taking a large group of singers (Mendelssohn Club Chorus) and coaxing them into movement that would result in stunning performances. Leah's imagination has no bounds. The last minute addition of a live horse and rider to our performance of David Lang's Battle Hymns was one of those moments that I realized the power of Leah's unbridled creativity. –Alan Harler

Without concern for being "innovative", Leah continually breaks new ground by plumbing her capacity for fresh improvisation, purposeful collaboration, and evoking a palpable sense of place. –Germaine Ingram

My first experience of Leah Stein was in a contact improvisation class that she taught at my college. The class was always overflowing because she was such a great teacher. By the end of my time in college, I knew I wanted to keep dancing, and I asked Leah if I could work with her in some way. Leah has an incredibly open sense of time, space, and people. What I loved most about being on the inside of her work was the connection with other performers while performing and making the work. –Aryani Manring

...I have seen Leah Stein weave a beguiling tapestry from the myriad threads of post-modern dance: revealing the ubiquitous nature of dance in venues from parks to canals to colonial cemetery to religious chapel; establishing egalitarianism between performers, through dedicated integration of non-professional dancers and inventive breadth of movement; infusing her practice and art with improvisation; joyfully having dancers vocalize and singers dance; and sustaining ambiguities and mysteries in a world hostile to them. –Jonathan Stein

I haven't really seen the work having been in it all. I think it's full of surprises and unusual occurrences. I've been amazed at her tenacity and ability to orchestrate the seemingly impossible. [It is] mysterious. You can never be quite sure what is going to happen. You have to trust and give over to the process because something will always happen, often magical. –Josie Smith

[My first experience of Leah was] at Wesleyan University... I'd just transferred from RISD where I knew her brother. He said to look her up -- she'd be easy to recognize, "looks like a dancer, strawberry blond hair." We crossed paths & I knew instantly. I first saw Leah's work in -- 1990? 1991? A life altering duet with Toshi Makihara & many heads of green cabbage rolling across the floor at Susan Hess studio. She has one of the most feminine, lithe & powerful dance bodies in Philly & has always brought such intricacy & fluidity & humanity to it. Oddly, her movement spoke to so many cultures, rhythms and places -- but never looked like it was "borrowing." –Roko Kawai

PDP Presents: Leah Stein Dance Companies 10th Anniversary. March 8-11, 2012. The Performance Garage Tickets \$10-\$25

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March 3, 2012