

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jen Kertis

The Naked Stark Warps Time at Clark Park

by Lu Donovan

Sunday afternoon, rushing to gather my gear for a potential downpour, I left my house just three minutes before the performance started. Knowing exactly how long it would take to stroll to West Philadelphia's Clark Park, a place full of familiar sounds, images, people, and memories, I was not concerned about being late.

A large red rug, handsome cello, shining metal vibraphone, and an audience of picnicking people shifted my attention from the usual park activity toward [tonight / which is last night / tomorrow / or the time we make](#). As I approach the performance space and settle in, the clarity between "show" and "normal happenings" becomes more ambiguous. Four performers, all members of [The Naked Stark](#), welcome the audience. They are dressed in black with matching rubber shoes (not quite clogs), and it's hard to hear what they're saying over the drone of the nearby ice cream truck. I make out a land acknowledgment and a collective breath, and I grin as a duet begins between performers and Mr. Softee, as if both the volume of the performers' voices and the familiar tune was finalized during sound check.

The luscious sound of Ajibola Rivers' cello commands my attention, a sound more poignant than any in the space's soundscape. Andy Thierauf, playing the vibraphone, joins in with a plunky tune and Katherine Kiefer Stark and Harlee Trautman embrace, head on shoulder. A dog barks, a person hushes, and a group of children scream in delight. The dancers move in unison with the melody, shifting robotic poses at the tempo of each rhythmic cue. They cut their arms through the air, jut their hips side to side, elongate the lines of their legs, even as the tempo increases and they're forced to keep up. The deep tones of the cello hum on, a bird chirps in harmony, and cheers from the basketball court roar. It gets harder for the dancers to stay sharp as they speed on with the percussion, and a dancer's grin lets the audience know that they've almost reached their limit.

At the edge of the rug there is a long plank of wood, an apparatus marking a score for the performers. Kiefer Stark goes to it and moves

a red stone, a place marker, down the side of the plank. Following this instruction, the dancers move from their angular qualities to a new section, one where the edges between their two bodies melt away. They fold into each other, filling the space between each other's limbs, shifting quickly to form a tumbleweed of torsos and elbows and cheeks. Their bodies overlap time and time again, making it challenging to distinguish between the two. A person wanders into the show area, cursing loudly at the gathering, and his voice collides with the vibraphone. Two friends are exercising just beyond, bringing their elbows to meet their knees in a bicycling motion, and their movement aligns with that of the dancers onstage. Even when apart, the two dancers appear to move as one, each gesture tied to that of the other, overlapping with the sound, with the space, and with the park. The interjections of offstage occurrences with onstage performance create both harmony and dissonance, and depending on one's perspective, the loud passerby conversation might read as a rude interruption. I think back to when Mr. Softee was superimposed onto the welcome, and how I chose to interpret it not as a mistake, but as a concert.

The red rock moves, we hear a percussion solo. The rock moves again, there's a trio between Rivers, Trautman, and Kiefer Stark. The rock moves again, a car zooms down 45th Street. The rock keeps moving; Mr. Softee plays the entire time. The rock moves again, and the robotic rhythmic dance returns. As the piece unfolds, the performers bring us in and out of vignettes of sound, touch, movement, and gaze. The sections repeat themselves, returning me to the first iteration of this particular score.

Was it tonight, yesterday, or is this tomorrow?

In remembering a dance that happened just 15 minutes prior, the audience is asked to consider the flow of time through ephemera, as fleeting as the Sunday evening in the park, which in itself is a repetition of Sundays in the parks through the pandemic, through West Philadelphia history, through this land's time prior to industrialization and colonization. Through a collage of bodies, sounds, experiences, scores, gazes, conversations, performers, pedestrians, animals, weather, and a Mr. Softee, The Naked Stark merges the past, the present, and the future.

[tonight / which is last night / tomorrow / or the time we make](#), The Naked Stark, Clark Park, West Philadelphia, April 29- May 1.

By Lu Donovan

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