

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jano Cohen

Vibrational Affinities

by Shayla-Vie Jenkins

Philadelphia Dance Project's annual Dance Up Close series opened with a two-night run of *Glimpse* at Christ Church Neighborhood House. This vibrant new work by Putty Dance Project, for four dancers and six jazz musicians, showcases a family of compelling collaborators anchored by dancer-choreographer Lauren Putty White and her husband, musician-composer Brent White. *Glimpse* is grounded in improvisation, a defining element of jazz music and dance. The six-piece band consists of percussion, upright bass, guitar, trombone, and trumpet. The musicians position themselves upstage just in front of a floor-to-ceiling projection screen. The four dancers flank them on the sides in chairs. No one ever leaves the stage, creating an open cypher for each to take up space, be heard, and shine. As the audience, we complete the circle.

??A rotating collage of timeless images of the cast appears on the projection screen throughout the evening. There are toothless baby smiles, school and JC Penny style family portraits, shots from birthday celebrations and dance recitals, mugging poses, and images from the mundanity of growing up. I feel tender seeing the performers in a full context, one that we are not usually privy to unless invited over to someone's grandparents' home for dinner.

Glimpse begins with the sound of the woody and resonant upright bass. I am entranced watching Jason Fraticelli's passionate physicality while playing. Then Pablo Batista's masterful percussion summons the dancers from their seats. They charge into the space with quick footwork matching the infectious joy of the congas. In their movements I recognize influences of jazz, house, African, modern, and ballet. I enjoy the slippery play between forms. At times, the dancers move from a 'get down' stance, grinding their heels and toes into the floor. They swivel their supple hips carving curvilinear pathways, extend their legs with daring reach, and isolate their torsos. The musicians skillfully call and respond, grab melodies and funk them out, while the dancers unabashedly work their bodies to find a visceral relationship in concert with the sound. Every dancer floats into and out of connection with each other, eventually returning to their chairs.

In the talkback, Brent White shares that *Glimpse* is 90% structured improvisation for both the musicians and dancers. I am particularly satisfied when moments of choreographed unison seamlessly emerge from the improvisation. In one section, the dancers, seated in chairs downstage, peer out while executing a gestural phrase. The gestures begin together but soon become conversational. There are multiple readings, inimitable in how they manifest in each performer. Arms outstretched are a plaintive cry for one and triumphant for another. I move closer to the beguiling allure of Sarah Warren's gangling length and the soulful quietness of Cecilia Mitchell's presence. Joe Gonzalez's immaculate dancing radiates with tender power in a sweet solo/duet with an invisible partner that he embraces and fist bumps. His dancing melts and slinks, punctuated with thrilling moments of suspension. It is evident that Gonzalez is a long-time collaborator of Putty Dance.

While the performers are compelling, the dance's structure seems to meander as it progresses. Lauren Putty White snaps it, and me, back into focus with a prophetic solo. She commands the space and is the only performer who directly addresses the projection of images. Putty White works her hands and quivering spine into a frenzy. Is she whipping up a spell for family—a blessing, a curse? In improvisation it takes enormous skill to simultaneously lose yourself in movement and also harness its intentional force. Putty White does this with awe-inspiring gusto. She deftly embodied and actively dialogues with the music, which makes space for me to feel its impact in my own body.

After the show, Putty White reflects that the motivation for creating *Glimpse* is "holding on and letting go all at the same time." The photos that capture fleeting moments in life also make us realize how much time has passed. For me, the journey of *Glimpse* is right here in the present moment of gathering. The piece ends as it began, with everyone back to their starting semi-circle positions and the teasing wail of one instrument. I close my eyes and simply listen as Daud El-Bakara's trumpet sends us home.

[Glimpse](#), Putty Dance Project, Christ Church Neighborhood House, February 24-25.

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