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SOLOW FESTIVAL

Down and Dirty, Like Accidents and Relationships

By Christina Gesualdi

This year's theme for Philadelphia's SoLow Festival is "Down and Dirty." This no-frills performance festival could not have found a better city to inhabit. Not only has Philly been ranked by *Travel + Leisure* magazine the second dirtiest city in the U.S., but it is also a place where performing artists can afford to roll up their sleeves and experiment, take risks and make bold choices in the studio. But without administrative staffs or money trees growing in their backyards, how do artists prevent their work from slipping so far under the radar that it gets lost, "so low" that no one can hear it?

The SoLow Festival tackles this set of problems. It's cheap. It's experimental. There's no substantial marketing budget. Solos or near-solos can occur almost anywhere: an elevator shaft, a bedroom, or a whiskey bar. On Sunday, Thomas Choinacky and Alie Vidich presented at Mascher Space Co-op. A DIY dance studio and performance space in Kensington, it seemed the perfect venue for this SoLow Festival show. As I entered the space that evening, I watched the performers themselves arrange clip lights and extension cords, cue a projector, and also cue the audience to bypass the regular seating and instead come into the performance space to sit in a row of seats on the stage area. Down and dirty, indeed.

Choinacky collaborated with choreographer Scott McPheeters on the autobiographical piece, *Off the Chain*. Forget dirt, this piece broaches the subject of blood, but not right away. First, Choinacky casually reminisces, providing a remixed account of his bike accident. He tells McPheeters that he remembers washing up in the bathroom of the Irish Pub on Walnut Street. He backtracks and says the accident happened on the night the Phillies won the World Series. His recollection of the jumbled chain of events zooms in and out, fast forwards and rewinds quicker than we can possibly track. The pieces of the story seem scattered like shards of glass from a shattered windshield. When Choinacky speaks of blood and gestures at his mouth, I wonder just how horrific the accident may have been. I feel like a detective, scanning Choinacky's performative body for lingering battle wounds, but I notice none.

Overtone of tragedy and voice-overs of poetry are introduced. Perhaps when straight theater is too literal for the messiness of an experience, we call out, "Where art thou, dance?" Choinacky begins dancing as McPheeters lights him with a clip light. Images

crystalize as narratives evaporate: at one point light cords dangle over Choinacky's outstretched arms, the swinging lights illuminating whatever falls in their trajectories. Choinacky inches toward the back of the space as McPheeters pulls the extension cords like reins, resisting the retreat. When the two disappear backstage, I am both mesmerized and confused. What comes next feels like Part II, mysterious and mildly erotic: a tiny bicycle shadow-puppet floats over, and sometimes even into, Choinacky's supine silhouette. From deconstructed narrative to dancing to object theater, I admire Choinacky's experimentation with finding a way into a trauma remembered.

Alie Vidich's *For Those Who I Love* is a piece is about "a complicated mother-daughter relationship." (as Vidich stated in the program) Not so much representing a chain of literal events as it is a stringing together of text and intense dancing, the piece is a Mother's Day necklace of spliced hysteria. As I watch it on Father's Day, it jars me. Vidich is nude. This "costume" choice feels essential; any other would be too loaded, too concealing. She sits still and silent for a long time, her head tucked into her arms. Then, her attention snaps outward and she begins a belabored crawl. She wriggles head-first into a skeleton-dress costume and looks at us as if to say, "What, you think I'm going to dress up for you?" She does: red old-lady heels, a glitzy cowboy hat, Simba lion paws. She looks ridiculous. Then she abandons all this, naked again. Her gaze has an aggressive edge and before I have time to further assess it, the stereo begins pumping Real McCoy's '90s hit, "[ComeandGetYourLove](#)". She begrudgingly does a jazzy number to it: hollow and showy, like a solo one might see at a children's beauty pageant. As she straddle-rolls to a halt, the music stops: "Sorry you had to watch that," she says. Self-referential reprimands ensue as she yells at herself insisting, "You're not sorry they had to watch that." Her antagonisms leave me laughing uncomfortably, uncontrollably.

Vidich finds pivotal moments like this one to let the dark emotion of the piece flood out. A psychotic-sounding screeching track plays as she gasps for breath, pants, splats to the floor, and gets up again. She thrusts her pelvis and thrashes at her hair. Occasionally her frenzy calms down. Although the piece is a solo, it is far from a monologue. Abstracted dialogues between Vidich as her mother and Vidich as herself provide content, meat for this fleshy piece to wrap itself around. The work reminds me that relationships are messy to the core.

There was no black-out at the end of the work. The technical mishap triggered Vidich to state, "Its over." This slip-up further commented on how solo performance about personal experience can be unbridled and down and dirty, indeed.

The SoLow Festival ran from June 14 through June 24.

Off the Chain/ For Those Who I Love, Mascher Space Co-op.

Sunday, June 17th (7PM), More info: <http://solowfestival.blogspot.com/>

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