

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Johanna Austin

This is not a review.

by Kirsten Kaschock

December 15, 2012.

I didn't want to leave them. The sky was a clear three o'clock blue when I'd rushed to pick them up at school, their coats hanging open in the newly-seasonable December warmth. I hugged them, I kissed the crowns of their heads, I smelled the lavender shampoo they never rinse well enough from their hair. And then I explained, as calmly as I could, why the adults in their world had suddenly become whispering, sniffing affection-seekers. Two hours later I handed them over to their father, distraught in his own way. All four of my boys left to get some slices, and I got myself together to leave for the Barnes Foundation.

Tori Lawrence + Company were screening *Elizabeth*—filmed by Christopher Landy with performers Lora Allen and Ashley Lippolis. Afterwards, the Brooklyn-based ensemble Bing & Ruth would be providing the score for *Holding Place*, Lawrence's collaborative work with dancers Amy Barr, Meredith Lyons, and Eleanor Goudie-Averill. Parking wasn't easy, so I got inside just before the short film began. I tried not to cough during the screening, but I did, a few times. I've been nursing a cold for over a week.

Did I just complain about parking, and a cold? I did.

Scene: Wheat field. A face, a frown in the eyebrows. A pocketful of dirt. Hand. A toy giraffe. Wooden chair in the wheat field. The kind of rocking that is grief.

Scene: In a gorgeously dilapidated farmhouse, a fully-dressed woman in a bathtub. Fingers dripping water. The lining up of boots, the re-placement of boots. Something not right. She rolls across the floor—this, too, a grief.

Scene: The two women partner each other in a light-filled room. A century of peeling paint. Sisters, I think. Best friends. The setting insists on story, and they are not lovers. Anger, comfort, a sadness made claustrophobic by the circling camera. As the woman from the wheat smears the bathing woman with dirt, I think *loss*—of child or childhood. The toy giraffe.

I sigh. I cough. The choreographer, dancers, and filmmaker answer questions about the house and field in York. About the rehearsal process and improvisational day of filming. The giraffe has no narrative significance: it was a convenient object that filmed well. I wonder if my children's toys are photogenic. For Christmas, the youngest wrote a list that included *gun*—a word later redacted and replaced with "gumball machine." We are told to move upstairs where Bing & Ruth will play a second set (I missed the first).

I run into friends. The space has high, vaulted ceilings with deeply recessed lighting—as in a spaceship, as in heaven. The musicians are at one end. Tables are set to serve expensive drinks on either side. People mingle in small groups, talking over the lush, ambient music. Many speak of children shot in Connecticut, of children knifed in China. Others are not mentioning the same.

Two dancers are seated far from the musicians. Another traverses the room before moving into the stage-like open space in front of the multi-instrumentalists. Their faces do not register the audience. I watch a dancer push her own body. A hand urges a thigh to make a step, a contraction pulls the head beneath a carving arm. These movements repeat and intensify. I feel bound inside my ribcage.

For forty-five minutes, three committed women—for much of the piece separated into duet and solo—exchange places and partners in the space. Sometimes one or two leave the room and a portion of the audience follows.

I do not follow. I stand, I lean to peer past others, I watch the audience. A few wander as if searching out the vantage point best suited for witnessing. Tension and curiosity: the work *feels* meaningful as it unfolds, but never tells. Like a landscape in a Victorian novel, it suggests. I try harder to read the audience's faces, but of course, this is illusion. We are inscrutable to one another.

For a long while I sit in a crouch near a dancer on the floor as she twists and readjusts and presses her open palm into the ground. She does not acknowledge my presence, but I think she must know I'm there. We are so close. I can see her breath moving single strands of her loose brown curls. I ask, *Who is not a child?*

A little boy, perhaps four, occasionally runs joyfully across the floor. His mother follows soon after—each time—to collect him.

When I imagine a story, I imagine three mothers. When the dancers march—united—weaving through chairs and tables, the word ringing in my head is *Enough*. The trio's floor work reminds me of waking from a troubled sleep—once, at the feet of the musicians, and then again, in front of an alcohol-laden table. I think of circadian rhythms, of Sisyphus, of other endless cycles.

The piece ends when the last dancer exits the space. The audience watches an immense window for the movement to continue outside. The women do not appear outside. They have passed through, and there is nothing further.

This is what I saw last night. It was not catharsis, and it was not "applicable" to the horror of the day. But the unwavering commitment of the dancers to their mute exploration of space and its swelling, reverberant sonic terrain allowed me to fall in for a while beside them. There was grief. There was also distillation, reflection, echo. I found no solace in *Holding Place*, but I was able to drop my thoughts into its well. I wished for something further. Not from the choreographer or the dancers—but from the universe.

I wished for meaning, for some action to make itself clear in the wake of the passing of children. Out the window, it was dark. Unlike so many, I did not expect nor imagine the dancers would dance on in the winter air. I felt the music. I felt it ending.

Elizabeth and Holding Place, Tori Lawrence + Company, The Barnes Foundation. December 14, 2012.

By Kirsten Kaschock

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