

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bob Finkelstein

Gem n' I: Domesticity As Performance

by Gregory King

An evening of intimate experimentation revealed Helen Hale and Maggie Ginestra's brainchild—a cross-pollination of poetry and dance. Performed in their living room on Mercy Street in Philadelphia, *Gem n' I* (the selected title after Gemini and Jim an' I were ditched) came out of Hale's own self-reflection and ultimate desire to make a duet. Hale and Ginestra embarked on a journey to create a piece about love and the intersectionality of linguistics and movement.

On Wednesday March 4th, twelve chairs lined the walls of the living room in their South Philadelphia apartment. A small drawstring bag containing a can of hard cider, a chocolate bar in the shape of a dolphin, a bag of almonds, a post card with wolves on the cover, and a program was given to each audience member. Each item served a purpose as we were asked to indulge in our treats at the same time Hale and Ginestra included those objects in the piece.

It was opening night, the first time Hale and Ginestra invited strangers into their home to witness what they had crafted. Home, a safe and private place for most people, became a performance laboratory where various artistic exchanges took place over the course of one hour. Hale, a dancer, and Ginestra, a poet, were able to gel their respective crafts without forcing them. I wondered whether dance would overshadow poetry, but the two forms co-existed amicably.

An audience member was asked to prepare a question before entering the space.

The question was spoken out loud to the entire living room as the performance was about to begin: "*Am I making the right choices with my life?*" A third performer, Danny Davis, initiated the piece by walking over to an empty sofa with an adult beverage in hand. He collapsed into the sofa and proceeded to finger the keyboard of a computer.

A recorded song began to play: in it, I heard the sounds of Christmas.

Davis proceeded to rearrange things on the coffee table. For the duration of the song, he adjusted his body position as he sipped his drink. He crossed his legs, uncrossed them, placed the keyboard on his lap, skimmed through a book, and sometimes, he simply sat still.

Hale and Ginestra entered through the front door wearing winter coats and masks made of ice. They removed their coats, hanging them on a coat rack, and hung the iced masks on the wall.

For the next hour, they vocalized, they played with recorders, they recited monologues, they repositioned the audiences' shoes, they ate almonds, they drank cider, they ran, and they took the question asked at the beginning of the evening and used it to play the [*I Ching*](#).

Hale asked the question "Am I making the right choices with my life?" She then tossed three coins six times, and Ginestra read the results. As in a tarot card reading, a cauldron was the spiritual symbolic answer to the question. The mention of the cauldron disturbed Hale and I witnessed what appeared to be an unplanned, unrehearsed moment that rendered Hale vulnerable. I found myself invested in Hale's vulnerability. I wanted to know more. But the tears that Hale wiped from her face were all I was privy to.

A beautiful moment presented itself when Hale held a round piece of ice while Ginestra held a lighter beneath it. The flame got uncomfortably close to Hale's fingers and she reacted to the heat by shifting them. Soon, she released the ball, causing it to fall into a bowl held to receive the liquid form of the solid object.

There was a time in my past when I had no desire to witness the minimalism of the post-modern era or the acting-filled, prop-wielding aesthetics of dance theatre. Dance, to me, was virtuosic exactness that revealed years of ballet training. Through many years of watching dance, my understanding and appreciation of the form has expanded past pirouettes and battements to include witty movement capabilities, innovative interdisciplinary collaborations, and novel modes of experimentation. The simplest form of movement can be considered dance – a walk, a skip, a hop, a gesture, even stillness.

Though not a trained dancer, Ginestra effectively performed a movement phrase atop an upside down mixing bowl. From a crouching position, she gingerly approached standing while reciting a poem. Hale led the movement sequences with awareness and body control, giving Ginestra the license to follow, which she did with unself-conscious ease.

A dancer, a poet, and 12 passive participants gathered on a cold night to test a living room dance. *Gem n' I* will change from night to night based on the question asked, but the cocoon of home will always provide a comfortable space for this kind of experimentation.

Gem n' I: a living room dance, Helen Hale and Maggie Ginestra, gingko parlor, March 4-8, 2015.

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