

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Michael Bartmann

Dance as Medium: a turning of the bones

by Scott Rodrigue

We enter to find Leah Stein, eyes closed, lying motionless on her back. She is centered in the first of four columns of light cast by the late day sun through large open windows. Gravel covers most of her torso. Perhaps it's the context, but I immediately think of a burial. Its weight is on her.

An homage to Dale Stein, who passed away last year, *Bellows Falls* seems to facilitate, chronicle, and sustain Stein's evolving relationship with her departed father. The piece is named for a train station near her parents' home in Vermont. I imagine it was there that Stein first began to develop this dance. Her reputation for immersive outdoor performances makes it easy to picture her processing and searching along the railroad tracks, improvising initial material.

We are not at Bellows Falls though. This site-specific work was developed explicitly for the top-floor studio of a former Iron Factory in Kensington. The building, Stein tells us, was the topic for one of the last conversations she shared with her father. He "had a love of gravel, trains and industrial decay."

As Stein explores the space's light, textures, structure, and resonance, something more unfolds. Past contacts and contexts have accumulated in *Bellows Falls* and are retained like talismans. Not just the space, but the bodies and foreign objects in it: the gravel, a tin pail, and several pairs of rusted railroad hooks, provide the initiating material for diverse sequences of movement and sound. The dance, with all its engagement in the present, holds a history of and connection to what has come before.

Violinist/composer Diane Monroe accompanies with sound and body. We watch as she and her bow move through space, like the dancers, producing meaning and image along with sound. Her elegant composition welcomes silence, or rather the chirping of birds and sighs of the breeze that join in through the open windows.

Bellows Falls allows story to arise from the concrete poetics of space, inciting images that emerge for the audience without reducing the physical reality before us. Jungwoong Kim, the third performer, continually evokes thoughts of Stein's father, all the while remaining himself, a dancer, like Stein. They approach each other on perpendicular tracks, clapping the J hooks they carry in syncopated rhythm. He passes before her. They are not together, but I feel her feeling his proximity. Eventually he will lift and carry her on his shoulders.

Perhaps *Bellows Falls* could be viewed as a kind of séance, gently evoking the presence of Stein's father so that she may have this dance. There is magic here—nature itself seems to respond with its warming sun and provocative breeze. As Stein places a large wooden gear at the head of a patch of sunlight, I see a tombstone and grave. Just then the wind picks up and the light drains from the room. A cloud has passed in front of the sun, and time stops for a moment before the warm rays return. Not until the last image do the dancers finally make eye contact. I am reminded of Darshan, the Hindu practice of seeing, and being seen by, the holy. The last performance is Father's Day.

Watching this past Sunday, in the wake of tragic news, I was keenly aware of living in a world filled with loss and departures. I am grateful to Stein for the intimacy and transparency with which she shares her process, and for all of the beauty she accumulates from what continues. I am also thankful there was no curtain speech. Enough was said without words, the many moments of silence all the fuller for the songs of birds and wind.

Leaving the venue, the song does continue. I feel more awake, more aware of my environment and sensations. A block away I find a large, beautiful, and polished stone. I walked right over it, unaware, on my way in. Now, I put it in my pocket and keep it as a talisman of my own.

Bellows Falls, Leah Stein Dance Company, The Iron Factory, June 11,12,18,19, 5:30 PM. www.leahsteindanceco.org

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