

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Thomas Weir

Think Before You Speak

by Rhonda Moore

A mixture of sounds, voices, bodies, and ideas populate The Rotunda performance space as femme.collective's *The Underrated Act of Talking to Oneself* gets underway. The new (just one-year-old) group's contribution to the 2016 Philadelphia Fringe Festival unites fifteen women as they investigate the interior thought-world and physical ramifications of jouska. For anyone unfamiliar to the term—I too, am a newbie—jouska stands for speaking aloud to oneself or engaging in conversation with an imaginary other. Though the word be new to me, constant use of jouska makes me a connoisseur, and the concert's title has my thought bubble a-growing.

Nestled in an outside courtyard tree, a dancer begins our journey with a spoken prologue, delivered with near-to threatening gravity. She speaks of stumbling, of stepping, then finally of striding, in a personal quest towards self-discovery. Her words are rich with the promise of dialogue, conflict, ritual, and interplay of all kinds. As we enter the performance space, women enter and exit the stage, each one executing idiosyncratic gestures. One dancer clasps and unclasps the hands, another repeatedly rubs her thighs, while yet another gently sways back and forth. All seem to be whispering with their bodies, each private movement part of a longer, shared, communal sentence.

The women move through the space tentatively, teeter-tottering on imaginary tightropes, timidly advancing into unknown territory, searching. Solos, duets, small and then larger groups offer us different points of view along shared pathways. The variety in number of performers and spatial delineation is interesting; what falls short of the mark at times is the actual movement vocabulary. All of the pieces contain interesting thematic movement material. Unfortunately, these snippets lose their force due to extraneous, superfluous, and at times, outrightly kitsch, trick moves. The long, slow center stage split and the hand-held side leg extension, at least in the form delivered, are glaringly gratuitous.

If the collective's principal intention is to expose the dynamism and wide emotional range of internal thought, or even just give us a look-

see, using the body as conduit, then this collection of pieces is a bit unadventurous and under-developed in range. Glitches in connectivity between the multiple works presented blur the overall cohesiveness of the total work, and much of what we see lacks the contrast, interplay and possible multiple meanings born of rigorous developmental processes. The challenge of collective work (choreographers presenting separate works on the same program or choreographers collaborating on a single work), especially if given the same prompt, almost always lies in thematic clarity and continuity.

The Rotunda performance highlights the works of nine choreographers who, for the most part, stay on task by proposing individual perspectives around a common theme—within their own work. These works now need merging. While the dancers are able and talented movers, exhibiting, above all, an earnestness that pulls at the heart, the dancing and the shy honesty don't have the wielding power to hold it all together, hopefully taking us to the depths our thought bubbles really do possess.

The mixed talents of this group might be better accessed through a thorough directorship, a discerning eye capable of highlighting the essential and eliminating the superfluous. My hope is that the collective, thinking both as performers and choreographers, revisit the material, free from preconception and expectation. My jouska voice suggests that "less is more" could be a good starting place.

femme.collective, *The Underrated Act of Talking to Oneself*, Philadelphia Fringe Festival at The Rotunda, Sept. 17-18

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