

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Janna Meiring

A Crazy Beautiful Hope for Connection

By Janna Meiring

Entering the doorway into an installation space constructed of enormous pieces of white paper, I am greeted immediately by the artist [Tania Isaac](#), and a feeling of familiarity. “Where have we met before?” I think, standing in wide-eyed wonder, observing the paper walls partitioning the space into several rooms. It is covered in scribbles, notes, and fleshy drawings. An artist’s notebook is typically thought to be protected and private—a place for solitary reflection. But, in a creative method she terms “open notebook,” Isaac gently ushers us into a private space, personally, without fanfare, which establishes an unusual quality of familiarity between performer and audience.

Within this enlarged living journal, she exhibits the early foundations and loose ends of a research process. She has written questions, followed by passages of poems. She has drawn out choreography in stick figures with ballpoint pen. She has made huge sweeping sketches of moving bodies with oil pastels. But this easily goes beyond a showing of archival material. In this space, we can write on surfaces, take photos of our own gestures in response to word prompts, and peer into the books that served as resource material. Inviting the audience to converse with her personally and contribute to the development of the notebook, she encourages playfulness in the balance of solitary and community experience, and points to our underlying commonality.

I approach one wall littered with phrases, handwritten in sharpie by past visitors. “I feel free when...” they all begin, each revealing another kernel of human truth. So small and personal, and yet an entire wall covered with these intimacies shows that we are not alone. As humans, we cannot be only solitary, nor can we be only collective. Evolution is a constant dance of reaching in and reaching out, of contemplation and expression.

Moving down a long corridor of white paper, I finally arrive into the performance space. Once again, I catch myself standing wide-eyed. It is as if I have stepped further into the heart of the notebook, a surreal place where the paper walls have unlatched their own hinges, and the scribbles and notes are free to float off of the pages. Above and around us in the large black box theatre space dozens of those

large rectangles of white paper are layered and sculpted into form by artist [Sebastienne Mundheim](#). Some papers are simply hung up with a corner bent, some are curled and twisted as if being moved by the wind, and some are crumpled as if they were thrown into the air.

Having been engaged in easy-going conversation with audience members throughout the installation, Isaac enters the performance space alone. She steps into a white-taped square on the floor, segmented into a grid of 9 smaller squares. Her arms and hands take on gently sculpted gestures each time she steps into a new box: she extends one arm out in front of her body with her fingers moving slightly, as if dropping stardust; she wipes her brow on her forearm; she pushes both fists into the front of her jaw and mouth.

Short, almost unidentifiable segments of familiar allegorical stories—*The Little Prince*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*—are narrated in her voice over speakers as she cycles through gestures. These segments interweave throughout the piece with Isaac's own writings and are layered with the live sounds of cello, viola, beats, and tiny bells. "Hoping to be deciphered and well read," I hear her voice say. In all of these stories, the main character confronts the inescapable cycles that life presents humankind—we are solitary beings, and yet we learn only through our contact (and conflict) with others. I feel this now. I am a solitary person in a mass of people witnessing another solitary person, who is *somehow* echoing an expression of all of humanity! This is a sensation that only the rhythmic, nonlinear ways poetry and dance can call up and bring into clarity.

The lights transition to a simple wooden frame of a twin bed, with white linens and a single white pillow. I recall the exact replica of this bed, in the "open notebook" installation, with a series of photos of an older African-American man struggling against a caretaker. A description tells us that this is an inmate sentenced to life in prison—and it is clear that he is dying here. On his sock in sharpie is written simply, "ghost."

I see Isaac roll across the bed pressing her face into the pillow while her body tenses. Then, she hides under it while exposing only an ankle or an elbow. Her pedestrian gestures have given way to a continual flow of movement infused with emotion, referencing a long range of experiences between childlike wonder and death.

She pushes the bed across the stage then crawls to a square of live green grass where a wild expression takes over her body. She grasps and pulls the grass, rocks side to side, and catapults her body into the air. In all of these actions, I continue to see a solitary person in desire of connection. Back in the bed, and after some time with her breath the only focal point, she extends a shaky finger to the sky.

There is an immense stillness in the audience throughout the piece, the kind that results from both the skilled command of the performer and the relevance of the material. But Isaac has also cultivated a palpable collective connectedness by charting a pathway through very private, but universal, themes. Without a pause, she brings us back to an easy place of conversation—to reflect or ask questions, to continue the nature of this as a *shared*, and never-ending, experience.

Crazy Beautiful, Tania Isaac, FringeArts, April 27-29.

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