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DANCE REVIEW

Bodies Like Statues, Beginning to Move and Then Set Free

By Gia Kourlas

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Is the performer the object or is the object the performer? Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud posed that question over the weekend at Danspace Project in “Sylphides” (on Thursday and Friday nights) and “Pâquerette” (on Saturday afternoon). Like the collaborators, both pieces are as audacious as they are important.

Ms. Bengolea, from Argentina, and Mr. Chaignaud, from France, have been working together since 2005. They are an inimitable pair, pinpointing an exhilarating place where fear meets bravery.

Part of Danspace Project’s Platform 2010: certain difficulties, certain joy, programmed by Trajal Harrell, the journey began with “Sylphides,” dealing with extinction and rebirth. The work includes four performers and three sensory-deprivation body bags, which sat onstage like inflatable pillows.

Chiara Gallerani used a vacuum to let the air out, revealing bodies as rigid and inflexible as figures carved into stone. Frozen in latex were arms bent to frame the head, legs stretched taut, delicate lines showing the ribs and vacant gazes. Under the silvery lighting, chests expanded and contracted as the performers took shallow breaths through straws built into the bags. It mattered little that you weren’t actually inside; watching was enough to induce a panic attack. It was fantastic.

The shapes gradually abandoned their marble smoothness and began to move, inching stiffly across the stage. The stern Ms. Gallerani pushed a cart across the floor and loaded it up with the forms. (Now the three resembled statues.) She filled two with air. As one tipped to the side and fell forward, the other, straightening out, hopped around like a Pillsbury Doughboy albeit without arms, legs or a face.



Platform 2010: certain difficulties, certain joy Cecilia Bengolea in “Sylphides,” at Danspace Project. The work includes four performers and three sensory-deprivation body bags. Tom Brazil for The New York Times

Eventually Ms. Gallerani set the bodies free, unzipping the bags to expose a beautiful woman with raven curls (Lenio Kaklea), a foot with painted nails (Ms. Bengolea’s) and a head of blond ringlets (Mr. Chaignaud). A Spice Girls song played (“Viva Forever”) and the Sylphides were reborn: feral creatures merged with Isadora Duncan.

A sense of danger also permeated “Pâquerette,” a duet for Ms. Bengolea and Mr. Chaignaud. Also the name of a 19th-century ballet, the title, translated from French, is “daisy,” generally recognized as a flower of innocence. For Ms. Bengolea and Mr. Chaignaud, the name perhaps had more to do with deflowering.

As the audience filed in, the two sat on the floor, draped in royal blue and golden fabric: queen and king puppets sprouting from the ground. Making eye contact with the crowd, their half smiles gave way to grimaces; squeaks of arousal dissolved into moans. As they awkwardly shifted positions while slithering on top of each other, their garments slipped off to show objects had been invading their bodies all along.

“Pâquerette” is hardly erotic; it’s more about sexual politics and levels of sensation. Ms. Bengolea and Mr. Chaignaud know how to get a viewer’s attention, yet their cheeky style of shock shakes you up in the best sense. You walk through the world a little more aware of what it means to be alive. The metamorphosis, it seems, works two ways.

Platform 2010 continues through Oct. 30 at Danspace Project, 131 East 10th Street, at Second Avenue, East Village; (866) 811-4111, danspaceproject.org.

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