

The Living Room

What a relief to come to a contemporary dance performance and hear the spoken word given weight, nuance and texture: to hear it allowed the same seriousness of construction as the physical shaping of the dancework: to be an integral part of the dancework. Working with Yael Flexer to create this interaction of forms, Gary Stevens' dramaturgy solves the puzzle that defeats so many attempts to use the spoken word in dance form. His understanding of the architecture of aural form, as well as the immediate imperatives of movement, has enabled dancers whose training is not necessarily in the spoken word to handle it with the same sense of rhythm, weight and texture that they bring to their movement. Often the spoken word seems to be an afterthought, an addition to the physical conception. Here Gary Stevens' work has the mark of full creative integration.

The result in 'The Living Room' of this move towards equality of forms is transformative for both the physical and aural movement and interplay. One creates a metaphoric relationship to the other. The suggestions in the carefully delivered tone of voice set against the accompanying movement, sometimes enigmatic, sometimes at odds, sometimes complementary and often genuinely amusing, give the audience a developing sense of the social space the floor has become. However, as is often the case with Yael Flexer's work, it is wise not to depend on the signals given or the willingness we all have to write our own narratives on the possible relationships between 'characters' and performers. Solid ground is not in 'The Living Room' – it is always a space in the moment of change: at the moment things become concrete they

dissolve into new formations. Yael Flexer said of herself in a recent interview 'I am a big mover...I have a desire to move'. Later she said she was '...a Jewish Israeli minority'. Big movement, need for identity, restlessness, are each signatures strongly present in this piece.

The performers take on assigned roles, or refuse them. They admit to various 'facts' about their lives, or, as the voiceover puts it, they 'abstain'. It is not clear whether these life facts are to be attributed to the performer or the performer's role, or both and of course possibly to neither. At the very end of the piece a solo dancer goes through a ritual of announcements in which she describes herself in three tenses – I will..., I am..., I have... The effect of these spoken fragments is to make the piece intensely recognisable, approachable and personal, whilst denying it any permanence at all. Things shift into other distances. Movement dissolves into voice, into movement, into voice. The choreographer uses a microphone to 'compère' the revelations, the role giving. The different languages that are available because of a performer's ethnicity break through and are submerged, a continual presence moving under the surface of things. And binding the whole event, Yael Flexer recites an almost parody of Yvonne Rainer's 'No Manifesto' which builds and gains comic momentum as the list of dances precious 'holy cows' is listed, paraded and rejected. True to the feel of the whole piece, the watcher is never quite sure which, if any of these elements is really rejected, or if all are present in some way. As with the whole of 'The Living Room' identity is as far away from secure recognition as ever.

In the final sequence, the gradual dimming of the lights is announced over the microphone, in plain terms of percentage fade, until only a glimmer of light remains.

Each performer places doll's house sized pieces of furniture into the shape of a room. Are the pieces they place there the ones they undertook at the start? The soundscape that accompanies the piece is layered and architectural in form, a concrete space in its own right. Its rhythmic structures, atmospherics and layered sonics never dictate to the movement but accompany it, three dimensions of sound in three dimensions of space and movement.

There is a clear meta- rhythm to the overall movement of the piece. The metaphoric relationship between the aural and the physical movement enables one to illuminate the other. It is no surprise that just as the spoken word seems to offer identity, clarity, permanence, so does the movement. Figures dance solo, in pairs, in smaller groups. As one establishes itself, another figure will interpose themselves, or one will leave the space. The orchestration of looks is as precise as the words and movement. The gaze is not fixed on some far distant abstraction nor locked in a rictus smile but acts and reacts to and on the moments that occur in the interplay between people.

Recognisable responses are here, though they cannot be relied on. The piece never adopts a linear narrative. Instead there is a constant narrative of identity, acceptance, rejection, of the individual finding room, living. As momentum builds and recognition grows, invariably such sections are washed clean by the whole company in complex action, running, or intersecting each others lines of movement, forming moving patterns that interchange and sometimes hint of a homogeneous group acting in physical harmony: but such hints are frequently subverted by figures becoming detached, isolated, unable or unwilling to maintain the harmony.

The movement conveys on the whole piece a sense of restlessness. Whilst certainly playful and subversive, the interactions between performers are not confined to those tactics; rather the playfulness gives an added force to the fleeting moments when individuals make contact. Uncluttered moments – a hand lightly placed on another's sternum, a subtle change of pace, a dissection of space between one figure and another, a section of extended, shifting body contact, a shared glance – hint at the possibilities in this colonised social space of another form of contact, a more permanent recognition. These moments are also acutely affecting for the watcher, reaching into the vulnerability of relationship, the danger of openness.

The Living Room in which both performer and audience are situated is transformed by a shared recognition of the nature of such spaces. Dr. Andre Grau describes this concisely in her paper on bodily intelligence in the collection 'Border Tensions, Dance and Discourse' when she says:

“Spatial awareness is so ingrained in our psyche, so much part of our being-in-the world that we are rarely aware of the degree to which we perceive and act in our everyday lives on the basis of concepts of objects, persons and events that are in large part constructed out of spatial features and relations.”

As the dancers act and interact, take on the trappings of living roles, animate or inanimate, the watcher is able to involve themselves in the subsequent passages of action through recognition of the way we all constantly colonise the space we occupy; then always move on, leaving minute traces behind whilst cutting the space we next occupy with a new relevance. As the dancers occupy their moment as sofa, chair, television, the movement sequence they then display is their own colonisation of the time/space moment. For that moment they become that action and occupy the

interstices between designated space and empty space as we all do in our daily life. In this way Yael Flexer's work powerfully communicates with the audience and her skilful and at times profound dissection of social space narrows the gap between performer and watcher. We are not excluded.

I will write, I am writing, I have written.

Alan Duffield. October 2010.

This document is the sole property of the writer and can only be reproduced or used, in whole or in part, with the writer's permission.