

LETTER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

RAWDANCE, FLYAWAY
PRODUCTIONS, MARY ARMENTROUT,
MARK FOEHRINGER DANCE PROJECT
SF, FUNSCH DANCE EXPERIENCE,
HOPE MOHR DANCE, CHITRESH DAS

BY RITA FELCIANO

For the last of these quarterly perspectives on San Francisco/Bay Area dance, I assembled a selection of what smaller companies put on stages—both inside and *en plein air*—during the first month of the new season. By no means complete, I tried to give a glimpse of why artists—and not just techies—still try to make this place their home.

On an outdoor stage **RAWdance's** (September 5, 2014, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco), clear-edged, cool and reserved choreography seemed curiously at home silhouetted against the darkening sky. If there are stories in their works, they are contained within the purposefulness with which the dancers relate, connect to and disengage from each other. There may be no such thing as abstract dance, but most of Rein and Smith's work comes close to it. They showed three different

works; *Hiding in the Spaces Between* (2011) was seen in excerpts only.

An all-women ensemble, in identical long blue skirts and black tops, performed the smartly brainy *Checkbox* (2007), originally set on a mixed septet. With movements grounded in the quotidian—walking, sliding, stretching and soft lifts—the even-tempered choreography played with the implications of symmetry and lack thereof that an odd number of dancers proposes. The work convinced with the clarity of its intent and the controlled yet never mechanical commitment these dancers brought to their tasks.

The very fine *After 5:00* (2007, revised 2009), Rein



Photo: Flyaway
Productions' Esther
Wroebel, Becca Dean
and MaryStarr Hope.
Photo credit: Austin
Forbord



Mary Armentrout and Rogelio Lopez in *Fantasio*. Photo: Ian Winters

and Smith's signature piece, has just a touch of a narrative about it. It looks like an upside down version of *Le Spectre de la Rose* with Smith, plopped in an overstuffed chair and beer in hand, watching Rein's fierce solo as if she were a vision. More than once she reminded me of Sylvie Guillem.

Getting together their interactions overflowed with the most improbable lifts, suspensions, throws and precarious holds. They looked like quarreling lovers; she rode him like an incubus and their limbs entangled like those of old oak trees. Yet there is no overt passion, just a beautiful working out of the tensions created by kinetic bonds.

Hiding's excerpt did not hold its promise. A well-performed quintet, its overlapping phrases featured liquid torsos, strong legs and soft arms. While details spoke eloquently, I missed a sense of a trajectory or commonality of purpose.

Giving voice to homeless women in the City's Tenderloin district, the aerial dancers of Jo Kreiter **Flyaway Productions'** *Multiple Mary and Invisible Jane* (Sept. 12, 2014, Courtyard, UC Hastings School of Law, San Francisco) took over a wall adjacent to a sunken athletic court in downtown San Francisco. Interviews

by social activist Rose Aguilar's with area residents had inspired Kreiter's apparatus-based choreography. (The Tenderloin, with its old housing stock, is under siege from developers.) While the work had moments of poignancy, they were more muted than in previous Kreiter endeavors. Remarkable was that at least two of the dancers were new to Kreiter's vocabulary and performed eighty feet above the ground with such confidence.

Becca Dean slowly hitched herself up the wall, desperately trying hang on to floating suitcases that escaped her grasp. With her skirt billowing around her, she appeared to drown. Chairs attached to the parapet became the stage for a restless trio about having to spend nights in a bus terminal without being able to sit. At another point, Laura Ellis recoiled into quasi fetal positions and then threw herself into the void as if attempting flight. Trembling, she was tortured by fear that her employer might learn of her homelessness.

In a lighter sequence to some quasi folklore tunes from Pamela Z's throughout appealing score, a trio danced with skeleton umbrellas that served as partners, refuges and playthings. Poetically, the umbrellas bobbed like dandelion seeds.

Still, *Multiple* ultimately disappointed. Much of the

ark Foehringer Dance Project/SF dancers: Raphael Bonmaila and Jamielyn Duggan. Photo: Frederic O. Boulay.

choreography looked thin, unnecessarily repetitive. Its sense of intimacy and reality didn't come from the dancers but these homeless women's rough and weary voices that Pamela Z had so skillfully woven into a score that floated over an audience on an oasis in the midst of urban misery.

Mary Armentrout's (September 12, 2014, Z Space, San Francisco) loquacious title for her latest dance/installation, *fantasia upon the moment when the woman invisible to herself and the man who isn't sure whether he wants to exist yet or not decide to go in on an apartment together*, is not meant to construe long-windedness on the part of this quixotic choreographer/performance artist. Armentrout creates finely honed pieces whose linear logic might be fragile yet they communicate intuitively. She is fascinated by a shifting sense of self, so fundamental in the way we experience ourselves. Using multimedia in conjunction with live elements, in Armentrout's performances the live and the virtual approach something like synchronicity. If earlier she had examined the individual, in *fantasia* she explored what happens when our identity becomes interwoven with someone else's through this mysterious power we call love.

fantasia consists of four radically distinct units, framed by issues of togetherness. It opened in Z Space's lobby had been transformed into a comfortable living room. Mingling with other audience members we could observe Armentrout and Rogelio Lopez, separately and together on video. However, inside the theater with 'In the still of the night', the piece switched gears as we encountered the couple stripped of its clothes. Impassive and looking lost, I thought of Adam and Eve after the expulsion. Even as they started to slowly explore each other's bodies, they remained emotionally neutral. They seemed involved in evolution, biology without romance or eroticism. Antony and the Johnsons' glacially slow version of "The Mystery of Love" seemed both appropriate and too soupy.

If the first section had solemnity about it, the two sections of 'love is like a string' took full advantage of Armentrout's comedic timing—both in speech and



dancing. Gushing about the vagaries and uncertainties of love, she hilariously entangled herself on one end of a taut rope that disappeared into wings. I won't disclose the resolution. Then, to two exquisite Rilke Songs by Anton Webern, Ian Winters telling video of shadowy couples put a context to Armentrout and Lopez journey along their rope.

The hilarious 'talking heads' projected Armentrout and Lopez faces against the back of two suspended chairs. They struggled to communicate on a Skype-like hook up—two feet apart on stage—handling the technical intricacies of this double vision with utmost confidence.

For the finale in the dark, we listened to Armentrout's disembodied monologue about life, love and being herself. It felt like entering half-sleep when your brain keeps churning questions to which in a waking state there are no answers.