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Keith Hennessy  posted 23 July 2002 02:51 AM     

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Review of Fresh Meat
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By Keith Hennessy

Dance in many cultures, including European and Western concert dance, has always been a gathering point for queer people. We're all familiar with the fact that many, some would say most but not all, male dancers are gay. And we ought to be familiar with the feminist roots of Modern and Post-Modern dance; a rejection not only of the patriarchal influence on the body and art but also an embracing of those gestures and habits denounced as feminine. Here in San Francisco, where the local dance awards are named after grandmother radical Isadora Duncan, the dancers are still dancing, queerer than ever.

What makes a dance Queer? Is it the body that's dancing or the eye that's watching? Is queer an intention, an aesthetic, or is it a spirit given presence by a particular lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender experience? These questions wandered through my attention as I watched Fresh Meat, one of many outstanding events during the National Queer Arts Festival. Curated by Sean Dorsey, Fresh Meat offered a near-comprehensive survey of radical gender and sexuality expression through dance, music, performance, and cabaret. Delivering on their promise to showcase fresh, local, queer and trans artists, the Fresh Meat team produced a rich and provocative program, featuring bodies and minds that denied simple readings of culture, gender, genre, sexuality, ethnicity, and style. Greeted by three Masters of Ceremony, we were introduced to three possible expressions of woman: the femme, a sultry Tina D'elia; the butch, a very dapper Michelle Ito; and the genderplay Machiko Saito, a high femme dominatrix, whose presence and style of exaggerated femaleness was more akin to male drag than to fashion female. An evening of very queer, performative celebration had begun.

Sisterz of the Underground, a hip hop and breakdance quartet, opened the show with the joyful noise of vibrant urban street dance. Seen as often in theaters as in parking lots and city streets, the irreverent STEAMROLLER Dance Company performed "Box," a short duet for Arnel Alcordo and Jesse Bie, choreographed by Bie. To a soundtrack of hateful, anti-gay messages left anonymously on Bie's voicemail a year ago, the two men engaged in a repeating series of lifts and weight exchanges that flirted as much with gender expression as with dance gestures. Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa could be the hybrid performance child of Rachel Rosenthal and Guillermo Gomez Peña. Embodying a polyvocal manipulation of gesture, character, percussion, and language, Otálvaro-Hormillosa performed a simultaneously entertaining and intelligent essay on cultural conflict, colonial remnants, and hybrid identity.

Sean Dorsey, an independent choreographer and performer with Lizz Roman and Dancers, danced a subtle solo that suggested an interior conversation or play of sensations that invited this viewer into a curiosity about the possibility of a non-gendered body. The work was marked by a formal precision of articulate yet abstract gestures amid geometric floor patterns sharply defined by light and a soundscape of recorded text. Seen in contrast with most of the Fresh Meat program, Dorsey's work was queer more by subtext, inference and association rather than by declaration or demonstration.

I wasn't expecting Fresh Meat to present male-female dance duets. That just wouldn't be queer. But with 'gay' couples showing up on major concert stages in the Bay Area and around the world, Fresh Meat featured two couples whose male-female partnering was saturated in queer inference and non-mainstream gender expression. In "Tired" Kevin Clarke and Monique Jenkinson (aka Hagen & Simone), wearing short blond wigs, red satin undies, and glittered nipples, embodied a mutant, glam, two-headed creature recovering from an exhausting three-legged race. With their matching costumes, oddly queer sensibility, and precision choreography Hagen & Simone recall New York's infamous downtown performance duo DanceNoise. In the sharpest dancing of the whole program, Jose Navarrete & Debby Kajiyama danced two deliciously intense tangos. The first, a more traditional piece to the music of Juan D'arienzo, and the second an evolutionary cultural hybrid of tango and contemporary performance to the music of Kodo. The electricity between these dancers was palpably hot and sexual stereotypes wilted in their heat. It's worth noting that I first saw these performers dancing tango in the streets at a performance protest outside the Italian consulate in response to the cop killing of a young activist at the anti-corporate globalization actions in Genoa.

Local tranny hero Shawna Virago and the Deadly Nightshade Family gave a short set of classic garage rock featuring "Tranimal," a potent anthem for the no-longer-boy-or-girl crowd. In "GoingnoWhere," Jared Kaplan, an oft-sighted local dancer as well as a stalwart organizer with Dancers' Group, performed his farewell dance to San Francisco before moving back to New York. With sweeping gestures, Kaplan danced a long-limbed improvisation inspired by the hauntingly evocative music of Jeff Buckley. Queer artists, including musician John Cage and Contact Improvisation innovator Steve Paxton, have played a seminal role in the development of improvisation in contemporary performance. In the pause after Kaplan's dance, I couldn't help but consider the ways we improvise - adapt, innovate and spontaneously compose - our genders and sexuality.

Anyone with eyes to the street can sense the cultural explosion of FTM film, performance, literature, and sexual exploration that has challenged and graced San Francisco in recent years. A quartet of transgender men performed two

vulnerable and honest scenes from a larger work, "Trans Men Tell Their Tales" that had premiered at LunaSea. These well-performed stories served as windows to a historically closed culture, offering an amazing fusion of what we used to refer to as either male or female experience such as buying tampons or bragging about strip joints.

Beginning in the dark, his body unseen, Mario Balcita seduced us with his sweet singing voice. When the lights came up Balcita punched his way through an ugly tale of desperate sex for fat boys in gym-body gay culture. Balcita's performance was raw with rage and yet shockingly tender. Deep Dickcollective, Matthue Roth, House of Vogue, and each of our glamorous MC's also performed notable works.

Riding bikes home through the Mission, my manfriend and I left the performance happy and inspired. The radicals, freaks, and inventors have not all abandoned San Francisco. The next generation of cultural innovators is tilling the field once again, and even Queer is just manure for the ongoing evolution and liberation of our bodies, desires, minds, and visions.