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DANCE

Review: 'Social Dance 9-12: Encounter,' Up Close and Personal

By **BRIAN SEIBERT** OCT. 16, 2015

A performer, nearly close enough to touch, stares into your eyes. As her expression morphs, registering flirtation, affection, astonishment, hurt, distrust, you might wonder to what extent those changes are reactions to the face the performer is watching: yours. It is a thought prompted by the muscles of your own face, which seem compelled to mirror hers.

This social interaction is the core encounter of "Social Dance 9-12: Encounter," a mostly engrossing exercise choreographed by Moriah Evans that had its debut at Danspace Project on Thursday. Audience members are seated on cushions on all four sides of the performance area, on the same level as seated dancers, and during the hourlong performance, the six dancers mingle, going from person to person.

You can watch an encounter across the way, imagining the expressions of a performer whose face you can't see by its reflection, so to speak, in the face of a spectator. Or the intimate encounter might be happening right next to you, until the performer's gaze wanders and snags yours, trapping you, even as you might notice, in your peripheral vision, something potentially more interesting.

For there are more layers to "Social Dance 9-12" than just the staring

contests. The dancers — Rashaun Mitchell, Benny Olk, Maggie Cloud, Lizzie Feidelson, Irène Hultman and Lydia Okrent, a striking bunch, facially and otherwise — pass around movement sequences. To David Watson's score of violin and viola over a tidal drone, the dancers slowly assume bent, tilted positions. Later, they move more wildly, jumping sideways with shimmying shoulders. Mostly their dancing, interspersed with the audience encounters, is independent, but at one point, they briefly coalesce into imitative pairs, the facial mirroring writ large.

Ms. Evans is a smart, idea-driven choreographer, and “Social Dance 9-12” is intelligently staged to provoke thought about choreography and social interactions. However, as in her previous works “Social Dance 1-8: Index” and “Another Performance,” her emphasis on making her process visible leads to some anti-theatrical dryness. At various junctures, Kathy Kaufman's lighting dims dramatically, and the performers look at one another, as if asking “What next?” But what comes next is just a slight variation on what has come before, sometimes, as in the ending, a diminution. The ensuing disappointment is a testament to Ms. Evans's intriguing mind and her ability to gain and hold a viewer's attention, but it's still a disappointment.

“Social Dance 9-12: Encounter” continues through Saturday at Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church, Manhattan; danspaceproject.org.