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Liss Fain Dance

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Post subject: Liss Fain Dance

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Liss Fain Dance
Powerhouse Arena
Brooklyn, New York

March 7, 2013

The Water is Clear and Still

-- by Jerry Hochman

Liss Fain Dance, a San Francisco-based contemporary dance company, gave two performances of Ms. Fain's *The Water is Clear and Still* at Brooklyn's Powerhouse Arena on March 7 and 8. The program lasted an hour, and I left feeling disappointed - I wanted to see more.

One view of a company, and one performance consisting of one piece which itself is restricted by the 'installation' nature of the work and its limited concept, may not provide sufficient basis on which to describe a choreographer's style and a small company's overall proficiency. But given these limitations, this viewer found Liss Fain Dance to be an engaging group of dancers, fueled by equally engaging choreography crafted by Ms. Fain (purportedly in artistic collaboration with her dancers and other members of the company's creative staff), which itself was inspired by an equally engaging word-score created by renowned author Jamaica Kincaid (published in Ms. Kincaid's collection of short stories: "At the Bottom of the River"). *The Water is Clear and Still* is a lovely piece to watch.

Based on this piece, Ms. Fain's style appears to be a fusion of ballet

sensitivity and contemporary application. It is danced barefoot, but it includes (and is dominated by) lyrical movement quality incorporating balletic positions, fluidity and sense of lightness (more reaching out than pulling in), with contemporary physicality and energy accompanying occasional angular movement, thrusts and contractions, creating an atmosphere of natural, rough-edged precision. Translated, that means it's hard to describe just by the steps and positions alone. The movement quality is warm and accessible, rather than distant and mechanical, and very easy to like. It is also, at least as limited by the confines of this piece, very circular. That is, the movement generally appears to turn on its axis as sections of the piece unfold. This adds to the piece's sense of inviting the audience in – as if captured by the piece's centrifugal energy. Again based solely on this piece, Ms. Fain's choreographic vocabulary seems limited – but she effectively camouflages this limitation by shuffling and reshuffling the basic positions through the use of different combinations and sequencing, and by taking advantage of the different viewpoints that the piece allows.

The Water is Clear and Still is a work designed as a performance installation. That is, although the choreography and basic staging is 'set', its performing area is modified by the size and nature of available space. At the Powerhouse Arena – a large, square-shaped performing area with sky-high ceilings and built-in amphitheater/style seating on one end, surrounded by tables laden with books (the place is a bookstore and the books on the tables are for sale during normal operating hours) – the performing space was dominated by two large floor-to-ceiling pillars, which had to be accommodated in locating the piece-specific sets. The performing area of the concrete floor was covered by a dance floor, and sets consisting of metallic 'trees' (a couple with steps leading up to a landing, as if converting the tree to a balcony or porch) were installed at various locations that manage, to the extent possible, to avoid the pillars but also to integrate them, somewhat, into the set. The result is a performing area broken up into three basic small spaces (clearings among the 'trees').

The audience is invited to surround the performing area, and to move around the perimeters of the space at will, but not to interact. The result was not what I had anticipated – although of course the audience can be within inches of them, and is able to physically follow the action or move to a better viewpoint, I still felt an emotional separation from the dancers much like a fourth wall, albeit a fluid one.

The piece opens with dancers in the main central section stridently striking their chests with their hands as if to say 'this is about me' (a visual theme frequently repeated in the course of the piece) as a narrator, Val Sinckler, costumed like a Caribbean islander (Ms. Kincaid's place of birth and early upbringing were in Antigua), vocally presents Ms. Kincaid's words. I use the term 'vocally presents' advisedly – Ms. Sinckler doesn't just speak the words, she acts them with her voice, accompanied by

limited face and hand gestures, as she walks through, stops at, and continues walking around the set. Although she doesn't dance, Ms. Sinckler's voice, the voice of Ms. Kincaid, is one of two primary 'voices' in the piece. With her effectively nuanced delivery and presence, Ms. Sinckler is marvelous.

Ms. Kincaid's words are a framework for something larger than just dancing to words. While Ms. Sinckler speaks, the dancers move, emotionally, to the words. But this viewer rarely saw a clear connection between the dance movement and Ms. Kincaid's words (except for a wonderful sequence accompanying Ms. Sinckler's recitation of Ms. Kincaid's recollection of her dominating mother's warnings and instructions – explicitly verbal or piercingly implicit – to her daughter). That's a good thing. Had the movement been merely a literal translation from Ms. Kincaid (via Ms. Sinckler) to the dancers (via Ms. Fain), it would have been a more limited, less interesting, performance. While it does not tell a story directly, the choreography, the other 'voice' of the piece, amplifies the emotions inherent in Ms. Kincaid's words through movement. Indeed, this viewer found the best parts of *The Water is Clear and Still* to be the movement sequences spaced between, and independent of, Ms. Kincaid's words. With no simultaneous narrative, there was nothing to influence the audience's connection with Ms. Fain's choreography and the dancers' execution other than the wordless emotional currents that Ms. Kincaid's words had generated.

Ms. Fain has staged the piece optimally. The action takes place in each of the three 'clearings' (although at times one or another clearing is choreographically silent); sometimes the dancers in each space move in different ways from the dancers in another clearing; sometimes they move in concurrent patterns; sometimes they seem to overlap or move sequentially, and they all move from clearing to clearing fluidly, at times joining one of the other groups, at times changing partners. The process makes the entire piece a source of action and interest as if the dancers were responding to emotional currents and then 'settle' in different performing areas like water borne pebbles that move from place to place by the ebb and flow of a river and settle in different spots when the water calms – with the calm energy of the current creating the illusion that the pebbles are still moving.

Each of the dancers – Jeremiah Crank, Katherine Hawthorne, Megan Kurashige, Shannon Kurashige, Alec Lytton, and Carson Stein (in alphabetical order, as listed in the program), gave a commendable performance, and it would be inappropriate to single out one over another. It should be noted that the dancers are each completely different sizes and types (tall, short, shorter; athletic, thin, thinner), which by itself adds a measure of texture to the performance. The clay-colored tunic costumes (with rust colored pants for the men)– simple but perfectly appropriate, were designed and executed by Mary Domenico; the installation and lighting (wonderfully serene) were designed by Matthew

Antaky, and Frederic O. Boulay handled the projection design and was the overall Production Manager. The music that accompanied Ms. Fain's choreography throughout the piece had a variety of origins, from an enhancing but unobtrusive commissioned score by Dan Wool, to Franz Schubert's "String Quintet 956," to "Inventor Rutili" (performed by Anonymous Four). [I'm not a music scholar, but the Anonymous Four recording of "Inventor Rutili" that I located is a composition by John Tavener ('Hymn for the New Light'), which I suspect is Mr. Tavener's adaptation of a Gregorian chant of the same name, subtitled 'Hymn for the Lighting of the Easter Fire.'] The disparate elements all flowed together smoothly and beautifully.

According to the program notes, Liss Fain Dance has performed nationally and internationally, from California to Jacobs Pillow to Poland and Russia and points in between, since it was formed in 1988 in Boston, and has presented pieces (including 45 pieces choreographed by Ms. Fain) that use proscenium stages and performance installations. Its home performance spaces are the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Z Space in San Francisco. I saw no reference in the program notes to prior New York performances, which may explain why, for this viewer, the only disappointing aspect of Liss Fain Dance's performance was that it was of only one piece, which was only danced twice. I look forward to its return to the New York area – even if it must leave its heart in San Francisco.

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