

critical
dance

**Liss Fain Dance
3LD Art & Technology Center
New York, New York**

**January 16, 2016
The Imperfect Is Our Paradise**

-- by Jerry Hochman



Liss Fain Dance, a San Francisco-based company that last appeared in New York nearly three years ago, returned last Wednesday, for a six performance run at the 3LD (Three-Legged Dog) Art & Technology Center.

Even though the theater is in lower Manhattan, it's easy to get lost trying to find it, and even easier to succumb to a maze of detours if you navigate the city streets by car. The installation program that LFD presented, *The Imperfect is Our Paradise*, is similar – it's easy to get lost or sidetracked by distractions that initially appear unclear or superfluous. But the heart of this production is its choreography and its dancers, and the dancing was transcendent.

That *The Imperfect Is Our Paradise* as a whole not only works, but soars, is a tribute to Fain's choreography and her dancers' capability.

On the surface, and aside from the choreography and the dancers' execution, nothing works quite as well in this production as in the installation piece that LFD presented in New York previously, *The Water Is Clear and Still*. In it, the text was delivered live with passion and dignity, and the piece seemed to change from viewing angle to viewing angle as the dancers and the audience traversed and almost blended into the expansive and irregularly shaped set.

Here, none of the collaborative input seemed to gel. The text, from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, is presented in a taped reading by Jonathan Siegel and delivered in a languid and emotionless (though not inappropriate) drawl. And instead of enabling the audience to feel that it's a part of the action, the presentation here is more akin to 'theater in the round'. The audience can indeed move around the stage-floor perimeter and see the choreography and dancers from different viewpoints, but there's no sense of relatively discrete performing spaces with which the audience can intersect. It's nice to be able to stand close to the dancers and not be confined to a chair, but here the audience is always on the outside looking in. More significantly, the multimedia accompaniment of different images – a 'cosmic' sky; a country barn and surrounding land; a forest of trees; vertical lines that looked like prison bars; part of a weathered brick wall, projected sequentially on multiple bedsheet-like 'flags' that hang from the ceiling around the stage's perimeter – amounts to little more than a fractured scrim almost hidden from the audience's view relatively high above the stage floor. When I first noticed it, I kept looking up to see if and when the projections changed. Fortunately, the dancing was compelling enough to draw my interest back to the stage.

But even though these collaborative components don't work very well, they provide the essential atmospheric framework for the dance, and the dance illuminates the text. If you allow the somewhat depressing sound of the text and visual feel of the projections to filter through you, the potential for distraction evaporates.

Faulkner's text is a brilliant but meandering and weary description of his character's thoughts, feelings and growth over time. The relationships and events that dominate his (or her) life are critically important when they happen, but ultimately, so the title of the novel would imply, they amount to sound and fury signifying nothing.

Fain takes the Faulkner text and sensibility to a different level and turns the novel's title – and its connection to Shakespeare – on its head (which may reflect Faulkner's real intent). An observation that events as they happen, as they are lived and dreamed, are full of hope and purposelessness, optimism and despair – but they're the building blocks of a life (aha! the multimedia bricks!). Imperfect though it may be, this imperfection is itself meaningful, vital and indispensable – the essential truth in the Wallace Stevens poem, *The Poems of Our Climate*, a line from which provides the dance's title.

The piece's success is not because it's particularly innovative, but because it's moving. From the opening moments, naturally and without ceremony, Fain filters the Faulkner text into relatively discrete episodes that seamlessly segue from one to another, each amplifying the atmospheric emotions. Not one of these episodes is a throwaway – the solos, pairs, and group dances, usually beginning on an edge and flowing into the middle of the stage and then off, are vividly representative of a panoply of emotions that run the gamut from anomie to affection to anger and frustration.

Fain's choreographic style is predominantly of a lyrical movement quality incorporating a sense of weight but at the same time a sense of buoyancy. While there's a fair share of angularity and aggression, fluidity dominates the movement's visual sense. Somehow, even though the piece is structured in a collection of bits and pieces, some vigorous, some introspective, some vaguely romantic, some reactive, the movement quality is warm and accessible even when it appears frantic, and it invites the viewer in – not just to watch it, but to experience it.

The dancers are largely identical to the cast of *The Water is Still and Clear* – a sign not only of relative stability, but consistency. Jeremiah Crank, the company's senior dancer (he's been with LFD since 2007), is the reflective, contemplative, and emotionally detached individual who watches (and at times sees himself in) events that the choreography brings to life and other dancers enact. Katherine Hawthorne's emotional character is more distant than Crank's. Tall and somewhat hard-edged, her performance quality (reflecting the choreography assigned to her) is less contemplative but more agitated; she slices her arms, legs and body through the air like a knife through butter. And Hawthorne executed the most memorable choreographic sequence in the piece (chaîné turns with alternating raised and lowered arms in rapid sequence) with the skill and insouciance of a ballet dancer trained in Cunningham technique, which is her background.

On the other hand, Shannon Kurashige and Megan Kurashige (sisters who also collaborate and choreograph under the name Sharp & Fine) not only excelled in their partnered and group dancing, but delivered gut-wrenching, almost violent solos as they fought life's slings and arrows. Aidan DeYoung and Sarah Dionne Woods, the company's newest dancers, had less to do but what they did they did well. Woods in particular, who joined the company only a month ago, delivered crystalline execution and emotional intensity where the choreography calls for it, and has a stage quality of quiet but simmering contemplation, always absorbed in the action even when standing still.

In my review of LFD's performance of *The Water Is Clear and Still*, I stated up front that I was disappointed when the piece ended – not because it was deficient, but because I wanted to see more. I felt the same way as I exited 3LD Theater to cope with the traffic maze. Two performances; two successes – albeit three years apart. Liss Fain Dance should be persuaded to travel to New York more frequently.