

Fort Blossom Revisited – an essay by Suzanne Carbonneau

Posted **January 28th, 2012** at 3:34 pm.

*In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the making of heroes.*
—Walt Whitman

John Jasperse is a distinctly philosophical choreographer. His dances have served as potent vehicles for existential exploration, posing a series of thorny questions that very often lead to thorny conclusions. He has shown nerves of steel in following these inquiries from work to work, wherever they might lead and however disquieting the investigation proves to be. Jasperse has proved so indispensable an artist precisely because he insists on examining those issues that make us most uneasy. In directing us to look in those places we might naturally shy from, Jasperse has served as truth-teller in an era when the very notion of truth seems endangered by ideology, benightedness, and wishful thinking.

Jasperse recognizes that discomfort is triggered by what is unknown and that the aesthetic remedy is to spelunk where the caves are darkest and deepest. Afflict thyself, might be his motto. Jasperse's dances lodge in those places others flee: habitually, he begins by forcing himself to examine a subject or condition that he himself finds disturbing. Indeed, Jasperse imagines that it is the responsibility of the artist to engage in psychic dumpster diving, with the artist's consciousness as first mark. In addition to the difficult content, he complicates matters with the admonition that he also face the aesthetic unknown. In continuously reimagining the tradition he has been handed, Jasperse engages with another kind of tradition—the avant-garde charge that the artist muscle ahead of the culture, bringing back discoveries to share with viewers and not infrequently disconcerting them in the process. "If I give an audience an experience they've already imagined," Jasperse declares, "then I'm not doing my job." Discomfiting himself, discomfiting us. It's double-barreled target-practice.

This revival of *Fort Blossom* is no exception. Once again, Jasperse is an aesthetic fireman, running toward the conflagration. In this work, Jasperse has challenged himself to re-examine notions concerning the fundamental stuff of dance: the body and movement. He begins by foregrounding body parts usually subsumed in western dance: the back, the soles of the feet, the genitalia. In *Fort Blossom*, Jasperse pays special attention to the buttocks and its interior. The resulting movement redefines beauty entirely: celebrating inelegance, awkwardness, unexpectedness. And in the process, Jasperse reveals just how profoundly concert dance—even in its contemporary experimental manifestation—is snared in unexamined premises about its own nature.

Outsiders might be forgiven for assuming that, as an artform centered in the sensuous, professional dance practice is inherently erotic. But as Jasperse says, dancers "have been trained to compartmentalize" their bodily experiences. In fact, in American modern dance sexuality is implicitly banished from the studio, just as medical doctors, for example, are trained to objectify what might arouse others. It is characteristic of

Jasperse, however, that he does not allow even these basic assumptions to go unchallenged. How well does this work in practice, he wondered? And where does the viewer fit into the schema?

In *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012*, Jasperse faces these issues with characteristic mettle and candor—examining the body as it has been the subject of art history, of pornography, and of clinical study. These are questions that Jasperse has been tackling since he first made his international reputation with *Excessories*, a work he created nearly two decades ago. But the acclaim it brought was paradoxical. Jasperse had created *Excessories* in reaction against the uneasy relationship that theatrical dance had with its audiences. He was troubled that there was a “pornographic vision” being applied to concert dance—that is, spectators could objectify the fit young bodies of performers while cloaking prurience under the guise of art. In response, Jasperse brought the lascivious subtext into the open, challenging himself to use nudity and sadomasochistic conventions to reveal the reality of the theatrical transaction. While Jasperse’s critique in *Excessories* was extraordinarily legible, many viewers brushed this reading aside in favor of the opportunities for further titillation that the dance offered. In a way, Jasperse realized, *Excessories* had backfired. Or so he then thought.

A commission to work in Israel got him rethinking whether *Excessories* actually had miscarried its mission. At the Batsheva Dance Company, Jasperse discovered a culture unlike that in experimental American dance. Among the Batsheva dancers, there was lightness and a sense of play around sexuality, and the dancers allowed natural eroticism into their experience of artmaking. Jasperse drew the lesson that the diligent creation of aesthetic form and content is an invitation to the viewer, but that he could not control the response of his audiences. They would bring their own desires, intentions, and critical processes to the work he presented. And Jasperse began to regard this not as the problem he had imagined it to be in *Excessories*, but as inherent in the excitement of artmaking.

He determined again to tackle the questions he had raised in *Excessories*, but this time more plainly and aggressively. The result was *Fort Blossom*. In creating the original version in 2000, Jasperse employed the nudity that had proved so vexing in *Excessories*, but, with his newly found acceptance of perceptual differences, in a more direct and pointed way. In acknowledgment of the troubled history around the female nude in western art and pornography, where women have been objectified, co-opted, and consumed, Jasperse reversed expectations. He divided his cast by gender: the men would be naked, the women would be clothed. And he embedded this dichotomy in the movement, structure, and design of the entire work, bifurcating the compositional strategies and stage space, devising an antinomic title.

As he worked on *Fort Blossom*, what Jasperse found of interest, however, were not these obvious polarities, but the ways that the dualistic experiences seemed to raise more questions. In the movement, for example, Jasperse created what he presumed would be a clear distinction: the unison movement for the women is outwardly directed and dispassionate, while that for the men emphasizes proprioception and sensation. But is one mode truly more experiential than the other? Is one less inherently aesthetic? Under close inspection, Jasperse realized, the answers were not obvious and what he thought he knew seemed to fall away. Jasperse was thrilled by the disruption of

expectation, by the idea that experience is more complicated than we assume. “That’s art, right there,” Jasperse professes, “you can’t hope for more.”

Fort Blossom is an example, then, of a prime Jasperse precept: art is an ignition for discovery. As he proceeds through his career, Jasperse follows the imperative to question what tradition—even the seemingly up-to-the-minute tradition of contemporary dance—means at this exact moment. “We have to keep living the experience,” Jasperse affirms. If he has given an audience the world as they’ve already imagined it, Jasperse believes, he has not fulfilled his role. He hopes, rather, that his choreography has provided opportunity for a shift in assumption and mindset, testing ideas with the empirical evidence of the body.

Jasperse does not cycle his repertory and this is the first time in his career that he has revived choreography after such a long lapse. But *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* is no mere reconstruction. In looking again at *Fort Blossom* twelve years on, Jasperse follows his dictum of continuous progression. Jasperse is taking the opportunity to re-work and expand the choreography and, to his delight, finds himself grappling with the unexpected. *Fort Blossom* had a limited run in 2000, but its reputation was enormous: word went out that Jasperse had created a bold exploration of our creaturely natures, willing to show what hadn’t been seen before on a dance stage. How to achieve the same effect after more than a decade of cultural evolution? In revisiting the work, Jasperse finds that there are multiple layers of time embedded in the dance, that, as he says, *Fort Blossom* looks “retro-futuristic, a dated version of the future,” rather like Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. To contemporize the work, Jasperse feels the need to up the ante as he re-examines and re-crafts the material. Where in 2000, *Fort Blossom* had “dipped its toe into the water,” Jasperse contends that *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* will take “a big dunk.”

Jasperse has not found that same anachronism at issue in the visual character of *Fort Blossom*. If anything, the original conception seems prescient. In its 2000 iteration, Jasperse deliberately chose an aesthetic of what he terms “maximum economy of means.” Its stark and simple design was singular in Jasperse’s body of work, which typically features striking décor and lighting he has taken an active hand in creating. His *arte povera* choice, which he is retaining in *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012*, could not be more timely for an economy ravaged by greed and fecklessness. It is of a philosophical piece with Jasperse’s *Misuse liable to prosecution* (2007), in which—a year before the worldwide financial crisis had detonated—he celebrated the makeshift as a fertile creative state.

For all of his experimentation, Jasperse is, at heart, a formalist. His success in engaging with audacious content resides in the anchorage of his choreography in impeccable craftsmanship. Jasperse honors his subjects with finely wrought forms, carving out facets to catch the light at different angles, as do stones honed by a master diamond cutter. He gives signal attention to the poetics of structure. Embedded in pristine architecture—rich in organization while devoid of ornamentation—the works are enlivened by Jasperse’s fecund movement invention. With its manifestly schematic design, *Fort Blossom* evidences Jasperse’s masterly eye in every detail.

Ultimately, however, Jasperse’s work is about ethics as much as aesthetics. For in

addition to its daring content and extraordinary technical accomplishment, *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* radiates humanistic intelligence. Revealing those experiences of our bodies that we conceal even from ourselves is an act of honesty and generosity, reminding us that we share the pleasures, pains, embarrassments, joys, and befuddlements of universal human experience. In foregrounding the act of perception, moreover, Jasperse calls our attention in equal measure to what is individual and what is shared. It's a perfect metaphor for democracy. Jasperse's performers model the manners with which we might engage one another—with clear intention, patience, sensitivity, and a sincere attempt to communicate. And in a culture so ideologically riven, it feels no small gift—relief and release—to find rapport in the fundamental commonality of our bodies.

Suzanne Carbonneau is a critic, essayist, and historian whose writings have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other publications. She has been Director of the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Dance, Critic-in-Residence at the American Dance Festival and Scholar-in-Residence at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and the Bates Dance Festival. She lectures and writes for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Ms. Carbonneau holds a Ph.D. from New York University and is Professor of Performance at George Mason University. Her biography of choreographer Paul Taylor will be published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

Intimacy's Many Facets

John Jasperse's 'Fort Blossom' at New York Live Arts



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

"Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)": featuring, from left, Erika Hand, Lindsay Clark, Ben Asriel and Burr Johnson at New York Live Arts.

By [ALASTAIR MACAULAY](#)

Published: May 10, 2012

The form of dance theater that the choreographer [John Jasperse](#) develops in "Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)" is often astonishing. Watching Wednesday's premiere, I was several times left with the sensation of having traveled to unknown terrain. The piece is an expanded 70-minute reworking of his "Fort Blossom" (2000). (We should not spend time figuring out what the title might mean.)

"Fort Blossom revisited" features four performers who remain onstage more or less throughout, and it's constructed according to binary principles. The two women (Lindsay Clark and Erika Hand) are elegantly dressed in long-sleeved short red dresses, with subtly

matching lipstick. The two men (Ben Asriel and Burr Johnson) are, however, naked. For a long period the women are together on the left, the men on the right. The dualism that develops between their two different worlds is extraordinary.

Something they do have in common is transparent vinyl inflatables. The two women have matching amber boxlike ones on which they sit and which they later wear on their backs like wings. Initially on the right there is a single large inflatable, like a small see-through Li-Lo: which, several inches thick, is for a long while all that separates the two men, as one lies horizontally on top of the other. The two men, in profile to us, move their pelvises in rhythm. We're watching a deconstruction of anal sex. The balloon, by separating their two bodies, has the effect of objectifying the movement. Then, after they have lain in stillness for a long, long while (itself an amazing spectacle), they deflate it until it is just the sheath between them. By the time they finally separate and peel it away, it's become a metaphor for a condom.

It's conventional — and often true — to say that the effect of presenting a performer naked onstage is to de-eroticize the body. But the erotic suggestiveness of Mr. Jasperse's movement makes this scene far more complex; I imagine most viewers find, as I did, that the erotic and nonerotic aspects of the scene keep changing.

There follows a slow male duet that is often even more mesmerizing — and yet more astounding. Only once do the two men hold each other's eyes; only once, I think, do their naked groins meet. But their intimacy of contact is amazing. The cheek of one man's face is pressed tenderly to the cheek of the other's buttock. One man crouches on all fours while the other arches right back on top, lying on him back to back. Most of these positions and movements would count for little if they were danced with clothes on, and for less if performed by man and woman. Here, and especially because of the slowness, they become a rare form of drama.

Something else happens during all this: which is that our perception of and response to the body itself continually develops, alters, shifts. As

these men part their legs, shift their pelvises, ripple their spines, there's little we don't know about their groins. And their bodies as a whole keep taking on new looks as we go on watching. It helps that Mr. Asriel's soft-muscled body is unlike the firmer definition of Mr. Johnson. The flow of lines in the abdomen, the back, the pelvis, the leg is wholly dissimilar in each case — and marvelously absorbing.

The duets for the women, though less enthralling, are more dancy and have a wry formality, not without absurdity (those balloons), that makes a perfect contrast to what's happening between the guys on the right. The women bend their spines, they extend their legs, they sustain specific arm positions, and yet there's a quality of pedestrianism to all they do.

Later the two couples meet. Some of this involves a happy sense of play — as the women thwack the men with those balloons, they keep redirecting them — and some of it involves more conventionally choreographic patterns, groups, lines. Yet conventionality has been removed by the nakedness of the two men. Arabesques, tilts of the torso, semicircular swings of the leg — these are simply not the same when two of the pelvises involved are naked.

It's very possible that "Fort Blossom revisited" would be largely unremarkable if all four performers wore the same clothes. I refer to it as dance theater, but should I? Its four performers are certainly trained dancers, sometimes delivering academic dance position and steps, often showing evident physical control. But the steps don't build into much by way of phrases; dancing itself seems to be deconstructed here. Yet meanings, ideas, contrasts, drama, keep growing as you watch. Dance, the body, and erotics are topics about which "Fort Blossom revisited" keeps testing, investigating and analyzing, and often brilliantly. Leaving the theater we are no longer quite what we were when we arrived.

"Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)" runs through Saturday at New York Live Arts, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077, newyorklivearts.org.

The New York Times

Nakedness in Dance, Taken to Extremes



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Benjamin Asriel, left, and Burr Johnson in “Fort Blossom revisited.”

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

Published: August 16, 2012

HOW do you react to the look of a naked body onstage? Thirty-four years ago, as part of a friend’s bachelor party, I went to a London strip club with a group of seven other men. We were all in our early 20s; most of them were distinctly upper-crust; some qualified as what the English call chinless wonders and Hooray Henrys.

Unfortunately, the show underwhelmed. Some of our party, good sports, feigned enthusiasm. Not all, though. As the show reached its supposed climax in a fatuously unerotic male-female nude duet, one chap leaned across the table and said, in piercing Bertie Wooster tones: “I say, Leo! Are you getting together a party for the Caledonian Ball this year? Because, if so, I’m *frightfully* interested.” (The Royal Caledonian Ball is a grand event of traditional Scottish dancing.)

That was the year I became a critic; I had no inkling how much stage nakedness awaited me. In experimental modern dance, it is now a widespread condition. A bigger surprise has been to find that sometimes — infrequently, but sometimes — it succeeds.

And when it does, it changes our perception of muscles and flesh; it plants new meanings and ideas. Its effect is one of drama. Meanwhile the exposure of the

unadorned body has even started to alter the world of ballet.

Thirty-four years ago, many must have felt that the big battles about naked bodies onstage had already been fought and won. In 1965 the dancer-choreographer Anna Halprin made “Parades and Changes,” in which a group of people, standing equidistant from one another, slowly removed their clothes. “Indecent exposure!” cried the old guard. “The liberation of the body!” cried others. Further liberation followed. Nudity was a famous component of the late-1960s musicals “Hair” and “Oh! Calcutta!”

Recently, though, several instances of nakedness have extended the frontiers of liberation; the majority of the more advanced examples have featured men. How do you think you would react to the following showings? In 2010, I watched a work by Christopher Williams called “Gobbledygook” at Dance New Amsterdam in which the dancer Adam H. Weinert — nude while other performers remained clad — stood with his back to the audience and bent over, enabling (or obliging) the audience to observe the crack between his buttocks and a rear view of his genitalia.

At the end of “[Crotch](#) (all the Joseph Beuys references in the world cannot heal the pain, confusion, regret, cruelty, betrayal, or trauma....),” a 2009-10 solo show by the performance artist Keith Hennessy, he sat naked but with his groin covered in lard. He gathered us, the audience, around him onstage. Pushing a needle with blood-red thread through scars in his own flesh, he sewed the thread through the clothing of the three people in the audience seated nearest him. He then gave lingeringly searching gazes into our eyes.

This June, at the climactic moment of “Pâquerette,” an hourlong duet at the Invisible Dog Art Center in Brooklyn (part of the Queer New York Festival), Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud, after removing what few garments they had been wearing, inserted dildos up their backsides and kept them there for perhaps 10 minutes. The only dance moment of note occurred when, side by side, each held a balance on one foot while using the sole of the raised foot to hold the dildo in place.

Even for those of us who have now seen a great many naked bodies onstage, the bent-over rear view of Mr. Weinert in “Gobbledygook” was something new. It was not, however, a problem. Though I didn’t much admire the work as a whole, that use of nakedness made Mr. Weinert memorably vulnerable.

Also new was Mr. Hennessy sewing himself to others in “Crotch”; I found the show both horrid and haunting — eloquent but creepily manipulative. But Ms. Bengolea and Mr. Chaignaud wielding their dildos in “Pâquerette” were just irksomely coy, along aren’t-we-being-bold-and-don’t-you-love-us-for-it lines. (How I longed for the voice of an English toff to interrupt with “I say, Leo!”)

When I tell friends of these viewings, they inevitably ask: Where is the line between art and pornography? But there’s always been a huge overlap between the two; you can see scenes of copulation on Greek vases and Indian temples. What’s more, many works of art have seemed pornographic without nakedness. Many of us are tempted to talk as if art = good, pornography = bad. Yet that’s wrong too. Much art is poor, while the novels

of the Marquis de Sade are pornography taken to a brilliant, horrifying and extraordinary peak.

The overlap between art, sex and nakedness was illustrated — superbly, I believe — in an enthralling, but thoroughly strange show in May at New York Live Arts, when the choreographer John Jasperse presented his “Fort Blossom revisited,” a 70-minute reworking of his short 2000 work “Fort Blossom” (whose title referred to a friend’s tree house). Two female dancers wore short dresses throughout; the men, Benjamin Asriel and Burr Johnson, stayed naked. In one episode, Mr. Asriel and Mr. Johnson lay on each other, in profile to us, sandwiching a vinyl inflatable pillow between them, like an air mattress. The men began to move their pelvises in rhythm.

We were watching a deconstruction of anal sex. The peculiar coolness and objectivity of the scene made it compelling, even poetic — and singularly unsensational. After it ended, and they had lain still a long while, they let the air out of the inflatable, as if it had been a condom.

In a slow duet that followed, now with no object between them, the two men moved together with extreme intimacy — yet only once, briefly, brought their naked groins to meet and only once, at a late stage, held each other’s gaze. Clothed, the choreography would have made no great impact. Unclothed, however, the intimacy was often astonishing. One moment of tender cheek-to-cheek contact involved a cheek of one man’s face and a cheek of the other’s buttock.

Yet everything in this work was ambiguous. The men were remarkably relaxed, dispassionate; and the slowness acquired its own cool rhythms. While Mr. Johnson and Mr. Asriel parted their legs, shifted their pelvises, rippled their spines, new contours and alignments of their musculature would emerge. The interest was heightened by their physical disparity. One had more muscular firmness and definition, the other more softness and linear flow. New connections of shapes and lines in abdomen, back, pelvis, thigh, different in each case, emerged continually.

My point is not to single out [Mr. Jasperse](#) as a great artist amid a field of awkward experimentation; I have liked other pieces by him much less. I mean simply to show that works of serious art can occur in situations where moral and aesthetic considerations are complex; the effect of good art is to make them only more complex. Among other things, “Fort Blossom revisited” showed how the erotic and the unerotic can coincide bewilderingly. Those movements and positions for the two men: were they sexually hot or cold? Scientifically objective or personally revealing? The answers kept changing.

I’ve mainly been using the word “naked” rather than “nude.” The art historian Kenneth Clark began his beloved book “The Nude” (1956) with a distinction. “To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition,” he wrote. By contrast, the image projected into the mind by the word nude “is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed.”

Clark knew and loved ballet. And I believe that what underlies ballet is the same ideal

that underlies the nude. Ballet's heroes and heroines wear clothing, and yet they deploy lines, positions and phrasing so that they too may project an image of the body as perfectly harmonious and apparently flawless. When you watch a prima ballerina in her tutu, her tights, her point shoes and — more relevant — her arabesques and her fifth positions, you see crucial aspects of the traditional nude. In her, you see the body balanced, prosperous, ideal, radiantly unembarrassed.

This paradox was taken further by Arlene Croce in a 1974 review in "The New Yorker" when, discussing the illusion created by ballet, she wrote, "The arabesque is real, the leg is not." Anyone who loves ballet will recognize the rightness of this.

Men in some roles — the title role of Balanchine's "[Prodigal Son](#)" is a famous example — have appeared bare-chested and bare-legged. The effect, though, has always been to establish their mortality rather than any ideal qualities.

In the last 20 years, however, there has been a trend for women to expose more skin surface too. In a popular recent ballet, Christopher Wheeldon's "[After the Rain](#)" (2005), danced by New York City Ballet and other companies, the ballerina, her hair loose, wears only leotard and ballet slippers. The French ballerina Sylvie Guillem, during her period as a star of the Royal Ballet in the 1990s and earlier this century, even began to perform parts of her established repertory (notably [Act Three](#) of Kenneth MacMillan's "Manon") without tights. Such a look emphasizes the individual muscles of thigh and calf.

Is this a big deal? A few paragraphs ago, I was talking about dancers showing us the cracks between their buttocks or deconstructing anal sex. So isn't it trivial to talk of a ballerina merely baring her thighs and calves? Well, no.

When tights are removed from ballet, the art itself is changed. Ballet, the genre that once recaptured the ideal quality of nudity, becomes instead, in these modern examples, the art of nakedness. This could prove a valuable new departure, but it's worth considering its implications. The look of the bare leg drastically changes the entire aesthetics of the form. Muscular details of thigh, knee, calf become suddenly distracting. The leg becomes real, the arabesque not.

Ballet, however, is principally a musical form of dancing. It was the former ballet star Robert Helpmann who famously observed the problem with dancing naked: when you stop on the music, not all parts of your anatomy stop at the same time.

In dance, therefore, stage nakedness is likely to remain the domain of experimental modern dance. In particular, it suits slow motion, and those expressive masters of snail-like slowness, the performance duo Eiko and Koma, have often appeared naked (though never in the shows I have attended). Fascinatingly, where it is well deployed, the drama beneath the surface feels far from slow. For now, let's note that the current extensive use of exposed flesh in dance is opening up new areas of thought and feeling.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 19, 2012, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Dancer, (Fully) Exposed.



DANCE | DANCE REVIEW

Working to Upend His Own Identity

John Jasperse Reaches Into the Audience in ‘Within Between’

By SIOBHAN BURKE MAY 29, 2014

For a young artist, finding “your voice” is the ultimate quest. By the time midcareer rolls around — should the artist make it so far — that voice, long established, risks calcifying into something more like habit, what once seemed novel now overused, tired from repeated exertion.

In “Within between,” John Jasperse, who has been choreographing in New York for almost 30 years — long enough both to break new ground and get set in old ways — ventures to deflect his own voice, to disrupt his sense of belonging, to construct a work that is “both mine and not mine,” as he explained in a news release. The project aspires to defy classification, though Mr. Jasperse is aware of just how aspirational this is. As he puts it, “In the end, everything begins to look like something.”

Parts of “Within between,” which had its world premiere on Wednesday at New York Live Arts, do indeed look like something, as in something you can point to and name: a ballet warm-up, a body-slapping step dance, Release Technique, Jaspersian leaping. But you can never point for too long. A tendu collapses (thud), the exquisitely pointed foot now deflated on its side; slow, convoluted balances infiltrate the barrage of body percussion. Almost everything in this delightfully dizzying piece seems determined to upend itself, on the verge of imploding or exploding or sneakily metamorphosing.

It all begins with a breaking — more like prodding or puncturing — of

that old fourth wall, as Simon Courchel walks onstage, picks up a long steel pole, and extends it into the middle of the audience. Its tip discovers the head of one audience member and traces the outline of his upper body. You could call it a confrontation or a conduit — a bridge — between insiders and outsiders, the performers' world and ours.

Stuart Singer soon joins Mr. Courchel, followed by Maggie Cloud and Burr Johnson. Together, they deftly handle the pole (which has been safely retracted), keeping it parallel to the ground and diagonal to the lines of the floor pattern, a grid rendered in green tape on a white surface.

Over the next hour, the work veers ever further from that initial structure. Snags appear amid skeins of carefree, virtuosic dancing: hands caught between two thighs, jiggling; exaggerated eye rolls; one dancer rattling another's body parts like salt shakers. Weirdness climaxes with a solo for the engrossing Mr. Singer, who could be a gladiator or an angsty toddler.

Jonathan Bepler's score, played and uttered live, surrounds us with expressions of uncertainty: a chorus of "sorry," gurgling and giggling, a barely audible "Is this O.K.?" The striped and floral costumes (by Mr. Jasperse) and Lenore Doxsee's bold lighting are also in constant flux.

But at times "Within between" gets stuck, like an itinerant windup toy, not expiring but not advancing either. Is this the right kind of nothing, that evasive nonsomething? Is this the goal? In these moments, maybe the most interstitial of all, the work can't help looking like itself.

"Within between" continues through Saturday at New York Live Arts, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; 212-924-0077, newyorklivearts.org.

A version of this review appears in print on May 30, 2014, on page C12 of the New York edition with the headline: Working to Upend His Own Identity.

danceviewtimes

writers on dancing

June 03, 2014

A Different Kind of Pole Dance

“Within between”

John Jasperse

New York Live Arts

New York, NY

May 28, 2014

by Martha Sherman

copyright © 2014 by Martha Sherman

Beautiful is not what one expects from John Jasperse’s choreography. Challenging and energizing, yes; but beautiful, not so much. In “Within between,” he intentionally upended his own history and habits, partly by using classical movement as a launching point for a work that cleverly wove his four exceptionally talented dancers in formal choreographed movement. Then, winking, he intruded on that formalism with idiosyncratic tags of his own. The result was a gloriously danced, beautiful piece about shifted expectations. It was laced with humor, unexpected twists, and a powerful instinct for reaching out and pulling the audience in from the first moment to the last.



Photo ©Ian Douglas

Simon Courchel, Stuart Singer in “Within between”

That magnetic pull came not just from the dancers, but from the music as well, performed live by four musicians, including the score’s composer Jonathan Bepler. As they settled themselves downstage, dancer Simon Courchel moved to the center of the green graph-lined stage, carrying a 25’ thin metal pole. He walked deliberately toward the audience, the pole pointing directly into the group. Until the very last moment, no one expected to actually be touched, but that was precisely what happened. Courchel lowered the pole on to the shoulder of a patron in an upper row (the sharp intake of the audience’s collective breath, audible with surprise) then dragged it back down, lightly touching others. At one point, he moved the pole’s tip slowly from the left shoulder of one hapless fellow, outlining his head, then resting on his right shoulder.

Having literally broken through to the audience, Courchel was joined by Stuart Singer, who stood downstage and became the target of the pole drawing. Courchel outlined Singer’s head and body; then the long metal rod connected their bodies, as they controlled it with small muscle movements, allowing it to roll down their extended legs and to their feet and toes. They moved to the floor and began their pole duet in earnest, arms and legs curling around the pole to create angled geometric poses, as Bepler’s score shifted with each scene from buzzes, pops and plinks, to giggles and vocalizations (“it’s okay” “oh my God.”)

Maggie Cloud and Burr Johnson joined the pole duet as standing partners. Though mismatched in height (Cloud is diminutive; Johnson looms above her) their well-synched leaps and arabesques were like the upper deck to Courchel and Singer’s floor duet, until all four stood and morphed into a quartet at a ballet barre. The pole, which had slid to the ground

and eventually was pulled off the stage, was there in spirit, and the four moved through class ballet exercises, lovely tendus, arabesques, and port de bras, to taped music that had been woven into the live score. Debussy's "Claire de Lune" was entirely in keeping.



Photo ©Ian Douglas
Simon Courchel, Burr Johnson, Maggie Cloud in
"Within between"

Jasperse's use of a quartet of three men and one woman kept the classical movement from being typical; he didn't choose the usual two couples. Having moved through a series of perfect poses, suddenly mid-jeté, more traditional expectations were shattered, as the dancers' faces twisted into gurns, with thick protruding lips jutting diagonally down. Their eyes, up to now calm and neutral, widened and bugged out – in shock or surprise, as their poses crinkled, arms and hands twisted, fingers wriggled in a kind of anti-ballet. It took very little to twist the classical to the contorted.

In the opening scenes, the dancers were all costumed in black and white stripes of plaids, and the stage was lit brightly, the green grid lines the only outlying color; later they changed to wildly colored, mismatched costumes of clashing colors and patterns, a signal that they were no longer bounded by formalism.

As the score moved between sounds and words, music and noise, the dancers moved from balletic leaps and twirls to squatting, thigh-slapping hiccups of movement, their facial expressions and the details of their moves never predictable. Most of "Within between" was danced on a diagonal slashing across the stage, including the pole dance duet and the quartet dancing as a pair of duets, or entering and exiting along the longest possible angle. Again, the strength of the line felt formal; when the dancers broke free, (in a few scenes where they were not partnered, or in a parade of trios in a later scene) it was bracing.

Each duo had a personality of its own. Courchel and Singer used long leg extensions to swivel along the floor, later into a more approximate duet, warily circling, approaching and falling back from each other. The relationships were cemented, though, as the four moved in and out of mixed trios, one dancer off stage as the other three created their specific connection, then the offstage dancer replacing one onstage, until all four had rotated with each other.

When Cloud was in the trio, she was the lightest to lift and swing over two sets of shoulders; when the men danced, they moved as a closely bound threesome, but with weightier shifts and lifts. Yet not always: when we got used to the weight, Singer did a bright cartwheel over the other two. As the trios wove in and out, the dancers were increasingly loose and the movement relaxed, though rigorous. Eventually all four danced together. They hopped, hit their knees, arms flipped around and clapped each others' shoulders; a few fleeting smiles escaped – this was fun, and their enjoyment was palpable.

Finally, the quartet faded offstage. Courchel and Singer, having been our opening guides, returned to end the piece. Their eyes were closed and they murmured to each other, first inaudibly, then we could hear their instructions ("let hands wiggle," "raise arm and put on my head.") Although they obeyed, each interpreted the rules slightly differently, and their movements, though synched, were no longer intent on perfect alignment. Their final instructions, before leaving the stage, were for themselves and for us, too: "Open my eyes." "I watch, I look." They were worthy reminders from a striking performance.

copyright © 2014 by Martha Sherman

Posted at 10:56 PM in [Martha Sherman](#) | [Permalink](#)

DanceBeat

Deborah Jowitt on bodies in motion

an **arts**JOURNAL blog

Blurring Thresholds

June 2, 2014 by Deborah Jowitt — 3 Comments

John Jasperse brings diverse sources and his own history into a bold new work at New York Live Arts, May 28 through 31.



John Jasperse's *Within between*. Standing: Burr Johnson and Maggie Cloud.

On floor (L to R): Simon Courchel and Stuart Singer. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu

John Jasperse is not the kind of choreographer who draws a movement style out of his own body and sensibility and sticks with it. He reacts to ideas floating around in the culture, queries his own practice, tries something he hasn't tried before. Often the movement he creates with and for his dancers is functional, whether the task at hand is moving books around, as it was in a scene in his 1997 *Waving to You from Here*, or sliding one naked body over another, as in his *Fort Blossom* (made in 2000, revised in 2012). He littered the stage with plastic bottles and other detritus in *Misuse liable to prosecution* (2007) and broke the famed fourth wall in *Prone* (2009) by having audience members lie on rows of clear plastic mattresses while performers danced strenuously over and between them.

His new *Within between*, which premiered at New York Live Arts, is by far the danciest work of his that I've seen. The stage is a pristine arena for it. Lenore Doxee, who created the lighting and visual design (the latter in collaboration with Jasperse), has covered the white floor with an green grid of different-sized rectangles; on either side stand two large, wall-high white blocks. The four dancers—Maggie Cloud, Simon Courchel, Burr Johnson, and Stuart Singer—initially wear snappy, variously patterned black-and-white outfits (briefs and shirts for the men, a short-skirted dress for Cloud); later, they exchange these for wildly colorful clothes that explode with floral or geometric motifs.



Stuart Singer (L) and Simon Courchel carry Burr Johnson in John Jasperse's

new work. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu

There is only one prop, but it's a humdinger. Courchel begins by walking onto the stage and picking up an exceedingly long, slim, flexible pole. With immense care, he inserts it into the first rows of the audience (no one appears to wince or shrink away), chooses a seated target, and slowly makes the pole stroke its way from the person's shoulder, over his/her head, and down to the other shoulder. He does this to two spectators. Think about the title of the piece. "Within" and "between" do not constitute a polarity; they probe (like the pole) at such concepts as inner feelings, relations among individuals and within a group, and mediation between artistic styles. Courchel's act, with nice irony, sets the stage for both intimacy and distance.

The adventures of that pole call to mind the maneuvers in Trisha Brown's 1973 *Sticks*, in which (usually) four women, keeping the ends of their longish sticks connected in one wobbly line, moved from lying beneath the sticks to stepping up and over them and returning to their initial positions. Jasperse, choreographing for four dancers and a single pole, may be alluding to Brown's work, while referencing the task structures of his own plain early works and the barre that dominates a ballet class; in the process, he creates an imaginative and understatedly virtuosic sequence.

Singer joins Courchel for a duet in which together they shoulder the rod and, in unison, maneuver it in increasingly daring ways; now it's on their shoulders, now it's resting on the toes of their outstretched feet, now it's caught on the crooks of their bent knees.

It's at this point that a plucked string breaks the quiet and is followed by soft humming, sounds of a throat being cleared, a brief "okay." Jonathan Bepler's score for *Within between* is a marvel—full of mysteries, quietly chaotic. Sometimes it's hard to tell which sounds are recorded and which are being produced by the four musicians, who sit close to the front row of spectators with their backs to us. Mick Barr and Eric Hubel are guitarists, Megan Schubert is described in the program as an "experimental vocalist," and Bepler is adept on a number of instruments. The recorded music features numerous artists—most prominently, the Ohio State Marching Band and Claude Debussy's "Clair de Lune," recorded by pianist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, the latter work at times transformed and merged with other sounds.

The voices escalate from whispers and become both more urgent and more organized, as Cloud and Burr join the other two dancers. At first these newcomers, standing, execute slow balances, while Courchel and Singer continue their adventure with the pole, but before long, the four have moved into double duets, and pole-bearing becomes a shared or exchanged job.



L to R: Burr Johnson, Simon Courchel, Stuart Singer, and Maggie Cloud in *Within between*. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu

One of Jasperse's sources is ballet. While "Clair de Lune" plays for the first time, the performers stand in a diagonal line and, in unison, perform simple, precise balletic moves without a barre (the pole has been carried away). But the classical look briefly turns cranky. A curved arm angles itself, a pointed foot clubs, and sights and sounds become spookily disfigured. As the dancers move smoothly through material that has the look of a pre-ordained ritual, they gaze out of the corners of their eyes and drag down one corner of their mouths. Percussion patters in, strings get harshly strummed, and Doxsee turns everything red for a while.

The complexity of these conjunctions among sound, motion, light, and color increases, and the dancers (who are credited as collaborators in the choreography) expand the range of their movements, while also occasionally referring back to moves they've made before (what Courchel had the pole do in the way of a caress, for instance, can be replicated by a hand moving over a colleague's head). The lighting, which has turned several of the rectangles on the floor yellow, then made the back wall green, gives Johnson and Singer the brightest of stages when they stop jiggling against each other and take off leaping across it.

Without warning, another reconfigured movement source crops up as the dancers move from two-part counterpoint into unison and advance on us, spraddle-legged and slapping their thighs and bodies

rhythmically. The allusion may be to step-dancing, but it has none of that African-American form's looseness-within-precision and jazzy edge. It also calls to mind the diverse ancestors of Stepping, like the Gumboots dancing of South Africa, and has a distant kinship with some Pacific Islanders' stamping and clapping. But quickly it allies itself with the other elements in this community's vocabulary, including the shifty gazes, the askew lower lip, and other facial expressions. At one point, Courchel and Singer carry on with the clapping and stepping and slapping, while Cloud and Johnson embark on what could (almost) pass for a slow-motion balance exercise in a ballet class.



**John Jasperse's *Within between*. Front: Simon Courchel and Maggie Cloud.
Back (L to R): Burr Johnson and Stuart Singer. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu**

I should emphasize that none of these borrowings seem eclectic; *Within between* is no postmodern pastiche in which anything can go with anything. It's as if all the sourced material has been made into communal property and re-modeled according to the values of an open-minded society. The crossover footwork that often figures in Stepping mates with ballet's *croisé* positions and anyone's maneuvers in a cramped space. At one point the music—a strongly rhythmic orchestral segment—sounds as if Kurt Weill might have been composed it, but didn't. At other times, it evokes a barnyard or a clutch of gossiping neighbors. The dancers (by now in their bright-colored attire) may leap about and perform other handsomely athletic steps, but with differences in timing and space patterns.

Other elements enter. Suddenly, the dancers are all smiles; "what fun this is!" they appear to tell one another. Singer and Courchel perform together for a while with their eyes shut. Singer then begins to

talk, describing in an undertone the movements that they're doing—a cliché unpacked from the early days of postmodern dance.

Within between is a wondrous work, made all the finer by the expertise and expressiveness of all involved. You can't conveniently liken it to a patchwork quilt or a photo album or a collage. All the memories, styles, and structural ideas have been merged into an intriguingly original work, their diversities absorbed and re-imagined by Jasperse and the very individual performers. Embodiment takes on a new power. Within what and between what delineate a landscape of possibilities.



You Might Also Like

Where Do You Plan To Travel?



Balanchine and Massine at American Ballet Theatre



The Herald-Sun



Review: Humor and athleticism in Jasperse piece

8+1

Jul. 10, 2014 @ 10:57 AM

By Susan Broili; special to The Herald-Sun



Submitted | Yi-Chun Wu

Submitted | Yi-Chun Wu. Maggie Cloud, Simon Courchel, Burr Johnson and Stuart Singer in John Jasperse's "Within Between."

DURHAM — If you want an hour in the theater to pass quickly, spend time with work by modern dance choreographer John Jasperse. The American Dance Festival premiere of his ADF-commissioned work, "Within Between," offered a memorable evening on Tuesday at Reynolds Industries Theatre.

A score of varied sounds and music, lighting in bright, tropical hues, movement by turns classical and modern, and use of humor sustain interest.

The first moments make it clear that this will be no ordinary experience. The dance begins with the house lights

up and French dancer Simon Courchel carrying a very long, metal pole as he walks toward the front of the stage. There's dramatic tension and nervous laughter as he keeps going until he reaches the edge of the stage and his pole extends to the third row of the audience. It looks like he's being careful not to poke anyone but he also doesn't seem in any hurry to withdraw the pole.

In the next section, this pole plays an integral role in the choreography as dancers balance it while at the same time creating a seamless flow of movement. They support the pole as they crouch, stand and swivel. When they roll like logs on the floor, the pole rolls right along on top of them without falling off. There's also suspense when the pole begins rolling down a dancer's leg and it looks as if he won't be able to keep it from crashing to the floor. But at the last minute, he flexes his foot forward and catches it.

The pole balancing also includes a funny moment when Courchel, Burr Johnson and Stuart Singer walk in a line as they balance the pole on one shoulder. When Maggie Cloud attempts to join them, she's too short to support the pole. So, she stands on her toes so her shoulder makes contact and stays on her toes to walk with the others. Humor seems to be a rare commodity in modern dance, so it's especially delightful when a choreographer uses it so well.

In the rest of the dance, movement includes some classical ballet. One classical-looking pose may be satiric because the raised hand gesture – fingers spread wide and extremely articulated – seems overly dramatic. Other times, quirky moves pop up. A dancer bends forward, thrusts both arms between her legs, sticks her hands out and wiggles her fingers. Another time, a dancer's arms go rag doll limp and flap from side-to-side as he vigorously twists his torso.

Dancers provide their own music as they stamp their feet, clap their hands and slap their bodies. Other music includes Claude Debussy's "Claire de Lune," bluegrass and a marching band. Then, there's spoken word both recorded and live. The live speaking occurs in the last section in which two men describe what they are doing such as "I drop my arm." Other times, what they are doing suggests that one's interest in the other is not reciprocated. One man says, "I crawl away from you quickly." The other man says, "I watch you." Then the first man says, "I go" and walks offstage as the dance ends.

AROUND THE WEB

WHAT'S THIS?

Newsmax Health

Alzheimer's Is Now Epidemic. Know the 5 Early Signs

The Motley Fool

Warren Buffett Tells You How to Turn \$40 Into \$10 Million

Zagat

50 Best Pizzas in America: One from Every State

Lifefactopia

Must Have Appliances Being Sold For Next To

[CONTACT US](#)

[FIND JOBS](#)

[CHAPEL HILL](#)

[TERMS](#)

The Herald-Sun

© 2014 The Herald-Sun

2828 Pickett Road

Durham, NC. 27705

[919-419-6500](tel:919-419-6500)

