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November 15, 2012

No Mistakes: Simone Forti

Posted by *Andrew Boynton*



A performance by Simone Forti is rare, like a little gem. The seventy-seven-year-old dancer, choreographer, artist, and writer is based in Los Angeles now, after many years in New York, and so it was a treat to be able to see her appear as part of “Platform 2012: Judson Now,” Danspace Project’s ongoing celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Judson Dance Theatre.

Forti is a renowned practitioner of improvisation, having discovered the discipline in the late nineteen-fifties, studying with the great Anna Halprin and her San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop. In the early sixties, after relocating to New York, Forti tried different movement techniques—Graham, Cunningham—but, she says, “I couldn’t do it. And, also, I wasn’t that interested in it.” At the Cunningham studio, though, she met Robert Dunn, an accompanist there who was influenced by John Cage, and began studying composition with him. (Dunn’s classes formed the nucleus of what became the Judson Dance Theatre.) Suddenly, Forti says, she became aware that dance could be conceptual: “We didn’t have to dance on a stage; we didn’t have to leap; we didn’t have to wear certain kinds of costumes. We were artists, working in the medium of movement.”

She’s still at it. The piece that she presented at St. Mark’s Church, “That Fish Is Broke,” was one of her News Animations, incorporating movement and speaking; Forti wrote in the program, “We interweave the flickering, fluid vision of the world brought to us by the news media, the writings of pivotal thinkers from the past, and our own personal experiences.” The

“we,” in this case, was Forti and two collaborators, Brennan Gerard and Terrence Luke Johnson, who have worked with Forti before but whose experiences in the improv form are quite different: Johnson has been practicing it for about forty years, and Gerard is just thirty-four.

The St. Mark’s space was unadorned, save for a stack of newspapers on the raised platform where an altar should be. Even chairs were lacking; the crowd was sparse, and people lounged on the carpeted terraces that ring the floor. The lights were already shining on the stage as the audience—an older group than one is used to seeing at dance concerts—filtered in, and soon after the church’s bells chimed the eight-o’clock hour the three dancers emerged from a door behind the audience and stood or sat at the edge of the floor. Then Forti, wearing a bright-red long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, her short, wild white hair framing her face, casually walked on, and began to move, and to speak.

As her hands and arms softly explored the air around her, she spoke of Hurricane Sandy, how strange it had been to be in Los Angeles while friends in New York suffered—the sense of displacement she felt. Forti is a petite, grandmotherly woman, and remarkably spry, willing to get down and roll on the floor, but at first she simply walked around the space, occasionally pointing upward as she talked about the weather’s havoc—poetically, repeating certain phrases (“the moon was coming full...”), then alighting on something that she wanted to expand upon. Her gestures were simple, almost childlike, or even non-human. Children and animals were a great influence on Forti in the past; in her observations of them, she saw that they were not part of the vocabulary of traditional dance, with its “isolated, fragmented, and artificial movements.”

Forti is eminently watchable. Her clear, open face projects kindness, thoughtfulness, wry humor. The very fact that she doesn’t do anything virtuosic or outrageous focusses the attention. Her voice, though not loud, still carries, and is marked by a calm sweetness. You hang on every word, because you trust her to have considered carefully what she’s showing you, what she’s telling you. Often, her utterances have an incantatory quality. At one point in “That Fish Is Broke,” she said, “I sometimes worry that I’ll die and be reborn in a place of war.” Her voice had a slight quaver, and there was no doubt that was speaking what she felt. She sounded like a priestess.

Gerard and Johnson brought their own personalities to the proceedings. Gerard, a wiry young man with dark-blond hair, was impish. His stuttering delivery seemed like a novice’s version of Forti’s repetitions, but he had a genuinely humorous streak that was endearing, and showed a talent for riffing with his co-conspirators, in a freewheeling way. He and Forti had a funny little duet in which Gerard, downstage, talked about his preference for the style sections of the newspaper, and said, “I went to H&M,” to which Forti, upstage, said, “I went to Goodwill,” and described the woolen clothes there, her hands fondling invisible fabric. One thought of the hurricane again, and the need for donations for refugees, and the absurdity of fashion in a time of woe.

Johnson had an altogether different approach. His speaking, though it displayed some of the stops and starts of Forti’s, came off as more linear and conversational, and his themes were more ponderous. In his first foray, he carried a white tote bag onstage, and took books out of it, laying them on the floor as he moved about nebulously and spoke about his family’s love of reading (in contrast, Gerard, in his initial solo, gliding along the floor on his hands and knees, mentioned his love of the beach—and of money; the line provoked chuckles). One of these was a book by the German philosopher and political theorist Carl Schmitt, which led into a somewhat protracted discourse on Schmitt and his unlikely influence on the Jewish writer Jacob Taubes, touching on Heidegger and the odd fact that these two idols of Taubes were Nazis.

An improvisatory performance is, by its nature, an unknown quantity. There may be a loose structure in place—desired groupings, or subjects—but the outcome is always different. And certain things just don’t work. Shifts in an individual’s energy, and thus among a group, are inevitable, and the potential for being out of synch is ever present. One of the dangers is trying to force something to happen, rather than just being open to the possibilities. Throughout “That Fish Is Broke” (aside from its references to water and malfunction—or poverty—the title was mysterious), whenever Johnson was onstage, the playfulness that Forti had so effortlessly established at the outset was dampened by his too obvious associations, and the organic development that is so necessary in an improv performance, and so satisfying, was missing. But there are no mistakes in improv.

The piece had no music; the lighting never changed. The only diversion was the stack of newspapers. Gerard placed

individual papers on the ground, creating a hopscotch-like path for him to crawl and then walk on, as he mused on a photograph of Hillary Clinton that he saw as he looked down at the papers. Noting that a couple of years ago Clinton had said, of the President, “Barack and me, we’re going to be O.K.,” he found a mantra: “We’re going to be O.K.” Gerard’s repetition of this hopeful refrain reminded us again of the storm, as did Forti’s manipulation of the papers in Gerard’s wake: she picked them up and, distractedly, haphazardly, crumpled them against her body and let them fall—a human shoreline buffeted by wind and waves.

“The beaches of New Jersey are fake,” Gerard had said early in the piece, as he crawled around. Later, Forti, her hands brushing up and down her torso and thighs, said, “Fresh water goes out, salt water comes in,” over and over, bringing to mind tides and also birth. This led into her talking about the possibility of a mother’s retaining DNA from children she’s delivered, and she and the two men began a tangled trio, intertwining their bodies—a triple helix. After a few minutes, their movements seemed stuck, lacking a resolution. Forti, who’s been doing improv for more than fifty years, whispered something inaudible to her companions, broke out of the scrum, and faced us. She said simply, “That’s it.”

Photograph by Ian Douglas.

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