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Identity Play

06.30.15



Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, 1912. Performance view, May 23, 2015, Paramount theater, Oakland, California. Faun (Matthew Roberts). Photo: John Hefti.

IF THERE IS A HEAVEN, there will be a theater. And if there is a theater, it will be Oakland's Paramount, a marvel of kitschy and sublime Art Deco grandeur. And if there is a ballet for you to watch, while you fill out the necessary forms (there will always be necessary forms) and your martini is shaken or stirred, I wouldn't mind at all if it's Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.

I'd never seen this ballet live until a few weeks ago, when I arrived, with no small amount of trepidation, at the Paramount for the Oakland Ballet's fiftieth anniversary gala. Galas generally make me want to die, and ballet galas, forget it. After you've gorged on pomp and circumstance and been dazzled by the first dozen fouettes et al., the returns diminish, and how. Three hours of pyrotechnic-laden excerpts later, you stagger back up the aisle, wondering if you actually like ballet at all.

But there was cause for hope in Oakland: For starters, this was an afternoon gala, with a fighting trim length of two hours. It was at the Paramount. And the program was studded with the Ballets Russes gems the company is known for, works by Fokine, Massine, Nijinska, and Nijinsky.

Most of these ballets were presented in excerpts, those efficient thieves of meaning and moment. But we got *L'Après-midi* (1912) in its entirety, including Leon Bakst's decor. Matthew Roberts's faun was both sexual and alien, stirring to Debussy's *Prélude* and provoked by the arrival of the regal and remote nymphs (led by Emily Kerr, one of Oakland Ballet's many appealing performers).

Nijinsky's flattened, bas-relief presentation of bodies and languid pacing is arresting and inevitable—the dancers slowly curl and scythe across Bakst's richly muddy backdrop like cutout dolls becoming almost real. (You see this almost-ness as well in Fokine's *Petrouchka*—an excerpt of which was convincingly embodied by Evan Flood, with Patience Gordon as The Ballerina—which premiered the year before *L'Après-midi*; so little faith, at the turn of centuries.) The ballet's depiction of masturbation scandalized; watching the faun pleasure himself against the departed nymph's diaphanous garb, I was struck by the implication that the faun desires the nymph's identity more than he desires her body.

It's gloriously queer, in all meanings of the word. And it reminds, as if one needed another reminder, how tediously straight, and straitlaced, ballets tend to be these days (the mysteries of art, that contemporary and present-day needn't mean the same thing; Nijinsky seems to have more to say to our ideas about identity than any ballet I've seen made in my lifetime). They give themselves away within moments of announcing their arrival. Everything about *L'Après-midi*, on the other hand, is laden with subtext—yet nowhere is this text burdensome.

I was thinking about the delicate balance of secrets and messages again earlier this month when I spent some time at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art in San Francisco, where Julia Heyward is getting her first monographic survey, "Consciousness Knocks Unconscious," a finely honed selection of video and performance documentation from 1971 to 1984, curated by Jamie Stevens. (You can feel the weight of the

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boxes he had to sift through to choose what he chose.)

Maybe Nijinsky and Heyward aren't natural column companions (though hell, if there is a heaven, there's an antechamber, and for sure Heyward's hypnotic proto-music videos run on a never-ending loop on gigantic, bulky period televisions). But both experiences knocked me sideways, and both made space for endless interpretation to sit side by side with dizzying sensorial feedback. It felt like some weirdo freakish conflagration that I have also been revisiting Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" while thinking about these works, or maybe they're what led me back to her. In either case, the longer I sat watching the title piece in Heyward's show, the more I had to say about it and the less I understood what, entirely, it was trying to say.

There's some unerring combination of cunning and innocence at work in both these videos and in Nijinsky's ballets (or at least what we know, or think we know of those lost dances this far out). I kept thinking about form, how it can become and elude content (sorry, Sontag): that there was a way in which each of these artists was able to burrow so deeply into their respective forms that these containers became strange to them, and to us. They knew those containers well enough to un-know them. And once that happened, anything could fit inside.

— *Claudia La Rocco*

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