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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Right This Minute, Leslie Satin and Dancers
The Performance Project @ University Settlement, New York, 3–4 December 2010

Certain characteristics prevail in Leslie Satin's contemplative dances: a minimalist sensibility fleshed out by the dancers' subtle undulations, the not-quite repetitions of actions in time and space, and the interplay of live action with other elements like video images and spoken texts. The full-evening quartet called Right This Minute was, the strongest of her recent works, notable for a formal clarity.

The piece begins in silence as Connie Beckley crosses the space–a wood-floored white-box theater with high green-curtained windows–twice. She carefully places two small boxes, which turn out to be speakers, on the floor against the blank walls, then returns to the downstage chair where she remains for the duration of the piece. An expectant air hangs in the audience as the lights go out, and a black-and-white video projection of an abstract tangle, gradually revealed as cylindrical bales of hay stacked up in the sunlight, fills the upstage wall. The camera travels over the bales, finding two women dressed in long black skirts and boots, draped and arched over the coil, their faces turned away from the camera. As the video image fades, four dancers enter and cluster in the newly lit upstage left corner. Facing diagonally away from us, they hold quite still. A blip of recorded sound, a fragment of a hummed or verbal phrase, occasionally ruffles the silence. Slowly, in and out of synch, they extend their arms vertically and horizontally, take a step or two, then break into flurries of turns or wheeling arms.

Beckley tells the first of a series of stories that weave throughout the piece, alongside the hums and whispers emanating from the speakers. She recounts her experiences of being a body in space, particularly in terms of being on a stairway. Sometimes she veers off topic by talking about phones, birds, and art. At one point she recalls how a tilting piece of sheetrock reminded her of a Malevich painting, a "Suprematist Diagonal Construction," as it was hauled up her steps, then righted, and placed in a pile. This description resonates against the semaphorically suggestive dancers who repeat movements: a phrase executed on the floor recalls the one performed moments ago against a wall, or a single mover reinterprets the material performed earlier by two dancers. These repetitions make the dance's vocabulary at once familiar and unfamiliar, altering our perception of time, space, and action.

Beckley's soothing, resonant voice accentuates the dancers' gentle gestures and clear patterns. When one dancer, then another, leaves the cluster, David Botana remains upstage, lying down, his legs raised and leaning on the wall. Ted Johnson

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then strides forward, opening up the space and initiating a long duet with Janet Charleston. The two dancers lie on the floor downstage, parallel to each other – their floaty arm and leg extensions echoing earlier gestures. Charleston curls to one side, rises and walks around to take Johnson's hands and pull him backward; Johnson sits up just high enough to gaze at his partner, then sinks into the frame that her arm draws on the floor. As they resituate themselves several times in new parallels, like slowly parking cars, Beckley tells more stories – one about Monet's haystacks and another about a painting, accidentally tipped, that becomes more beautiful.

And so it goes. The stillness, punctuated by flurries of turns or sensuous pairings, keeps my attention. More and more choreographic material reappears in new configurations – actions done against one wall repeat against another one, or along the floor, or juxtaposed with another phrase. Intimate moments occur, often in duets that drift into other configurations or just switch partners. Dancers constantly interchange with one another regardless of gender – pairings drift between being composed of women and women, men and men, women and men – creating a scenario in which relationships between dancers are fluid and open.

Much of the movement is slow and softly stretched, but Johnson has a burst of a solo, turning and jumping. Botana – who has twice stepped into an upstage doorway of light and then collapsed backward into the offstage space – joins Johnson to take turns racing up and down a diagonal, catching each other's falling bodies. My mind records a number of sequences, like when Johnson and Charleston rejoin center stage, this time to repeatedly embrace; when, during a small lift, Charleston watches her own toes graze the floor; or when Satin, leaning against the wall behind them, spins from one side to the other, arms high, gazing inward, and exits. Occasionally all four dancers are present, though only a few segments register as quartets per se.

While video has become de rigueur in most downtown dance, and often feels gratuitous, in Satin's piece the video extends the contemplative nature of the choreography with soft fade-ins and -outs, exquisite shades of light, close-ups that make the ordinary seem strange. At one point, as Charleston and Satin approach the rear wall, the projected rural landscape shrinks to a narrow band and rises above them like a canopy. In nuzzled pairs, dancers lie compactly on the floor, barely wriggling in the dim light as three glistening columns, reminiscent of Sainte Chappelle, descend through blackness in the rear-wall video. In another video sequence, which takes place while the stage is empty, the printed words of one of Beckley's tales gradually rises toward the ceiling and disappears. The women stand close to each other, both tipped slightly off vertical, and process along the wall via a string of eccentrically timed and detailed actions. Botana and Satin progress from upstage to downstage in unison for a long duration, their parallel paths continually complicated by spiraling and falling deviations as they repeat and alter complex and vigorous movement sequences, rarely facing the audience, never facing each other. At the same time, Beckley describes the systematic, eccentric way she climbs her stairs, and says she likes the idea of drawing with her body, making curves within the gridded city. Toward the end, Johnson enters and pulls a curtain aside, looking out the window.

In the last section of the piece, Beckley tells a story about guinea hens while all four dancers trot, skip, and wiggle around the space, stopping once to affectionately

huddle against the upstage wall – the dancers' other floor. After they stop dancing and the lights have gone, a beautiful image of city windows at night appears on the screen. Beckley's soft yet eerie voice lingers in the darkness.

In Right This Minute, as in all of Satin's dances, formal structures predominate and a definitive meaning is explicitly elusive. Here, carefully delineated lines of the body work in tandem with the tender interplay of dancers as well as with the enigmatic stories and lush images. Because her work invites us to be always present and alive to the nuance of gestures, Satin's dances often make us re-see the quotidian. Seemingly disconnected and random, by the end of the piece, image, text, and dance have combined to convey the subtle wonders of the everyday.

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Gotta move: Women in tap
Dir. Lynn Dally, 2010, DVD, 44 min Produced by Lynn Dally and Gayle Hooks, Los Angeles, CA. ISBN: 978-0-615-36027-0

Lynn Dally's Gotta Move: Women in Tap (2010) documents a three-day long conference and concert held at UCLA in February 2008, dedicated to dancers who have helped reshape the role of women in tap dance. "One of the biggest things women had to do was create new definitions; we made a new history. And that is why we are here," says Dally as the camera begins to roll. Her words lay the foundation for the next 44 minutes of footage. Overall, the documentary offers viewers a mix of scholarly voices, stories from the heart, and tap performances from generations of women involved in the community.

Staying in the limelight has always been a challenge for women who tap. The film cuts early on to Constance Valis Hill, a tap historian and dancer, who runs through a long list of female stereotypes – women are weak, women are nurturers, women are not competitors, women are not meant to be heard – that have often prevented women from basking in the recognition they deserve. The camera shifts to Michelle Dorrance's lively rhythms and then to Chloe Arnold's clean and crisp forward pullbacks. "We wouldn't call this conference 'Men in Tap,'" reminds Valis Hill. Then Josette Wiggan starts cutting; Dorrance responds with an equally challenging series of steps. This cutting contest demonstrates how these twenty-something dancers embrace a sexy style without sacrificing strength. The film also documents how their predecessors, in contrast, often sought to dance in more masculine ways and even purposefully dressed as men.

A wave of dancers in the 1970s did so to reclaim what it meant to be heard as women and not just seen as feminine objects by focusing on rhythm and musicality,