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## AKABI'S EXTREME DEMANDS ON DANCERS AND THE AUDIENCE

### Beasts of burden

Unlike most curmudgeons or writers of speculative fiction, Kurt Vonnegut amassed a truly impressive collection of dystopias over his career with, we sense, two abiding purposes in mind: to personally hold the problematic human line accountable and taut for as long as possible, and to keep the worst of his negative worlds from slouching their way across that line into fact.

While three choreographers lured us into their dystopias in a program that ran for two days last week at the American Dance Festival, one - Aydin Teker's aKabi - ;was so overtly like Vonnegut that the title of a specific short story came to my mind in the middle of the work.

In "Harrison Bergeron," a society hell-bent on absolute equality for all has empowered the government to handicap everyone above the norm. Those with superior athletic abilities must wear ungainly sashweights and bags of birdshot padlocked to their bodies. Those smarter than average are fitted with tiny earphones that emit loud, sudden noises, scattering all thoughts every 20 seconds or so. Those who are particularly beautiful must be masked whenever they appear in public, while dance artists can be, by law, no better than the average person. The goal of these efforts, in Vonnegut's workaday prose, is "so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in."

As if characters in the Vonnegut story, the four dancers on stage in aKabi—a Turkish word for the ball of the foot—are clearly handicapped by shoes whose extremely thick (and apparently heavy) black heels extend somewhere between one and two feet beneath the base of the foot. They're certainly not stylish: the matte black plastic plugs suggest nothing so much as the boots Boris Karloff wore while filming Frankenstein.

After hearing the dancers clomp ominously around in them in the darkness at the start of aKabi, we see them push a significantly limited range of motion and expression. Indeed, they repeatedly do so near what appears to be the physical breaking point. When the massive heels are laid on their side on the floor, dancers balance their bodies on the sides of their feet and walk across the stage in that condition, dragging the ballast of the shoes along. The stress such moves must put on their ankles, knees and the rest of the skeletomuscular systems that distribute the weight of the body has to be profound.

In previous years, Miguel Gutierrez's work at ADF has brought into question the ethical relationships between performer and audience. Once again, with aKabi, we were not free to explore the decidedly austere, even forbidding aesthetic of the work without having to wonder if people were injuring themselves in our presence. As was the case with Gutierrez' 2004-2006 work, Retrospective Exhibitionist, one's thoughts leaned toward intervention.

After Tuesday's performance, Ms. Teker assured me that the dancers worked for a couple of years developing the 25-minute performance we saw that night. She said they warm up for hours before each show.

These extreme commitments raise, in their turn, the questions of necessity and worth itself.

We honor the dancers' singular devotion to the work we saw at the same time we are forced to question whether such a work is worth everything they've put into it. How we determine that worth likely has something to do with what meaning the work ultimately gives us.

In the 1960s and early 1970s a number of theorists, critics and artists assessed the ways in which clothing fashions disadvantaged women in Western culture. High-heeled shoes were particularly singled out for censure. Does aKabi reiterate, or add anything meaningful to, a point made in gender politics well over 30 years ago? This is most unlikely, since the one man on stage bears the same load as the three women: It's clear that dancer Emre Olcay is in absolutely no position of privilege when compared to his colleagues.

Where does that leave us, then? A series of awkward moves and balances. Tension and suspense as we wonder if the dancers are about to topple over. Intense deep knee bends and leg splits that leave the dancers' genital areas open to scrutiny. The vibrating of jackknifed legs and thighs against the floor as ankles all but audibly stretch. The unlikely moment of physical grace when a dancer stands on one leg, while the other is folded up behind her so that the side of the shoe makes a stand on which to rest her right arm.

Is this a critique of new technology that has the power to simultaneously extend—and distort—the human body? The black, hypothetically medium- to high-concept exercise wear the dancers have on could conceivably lead us in this direction—until we return to the comparative formlessness of those plugs at the base of their feet.

A revolt against a prevailing idea of aesthetic beauty? Or merely—if such extreme processes can be appropriately called that—an exploration of endurance in extremities; how far the human body can go before failure when it is distorted and disadvantaged; a sideshow, perhaps, in the circus of physical extremity associated with Elizabeth Streb?

The work communicates none of these thoughts clearly. In the absence of such clarity, we only know we are in the presence of pain, and of bodies willfully placed in conditions likely to damage them in front of a paying public. Forget the comparatively infinitesimal costs in time and money of its audience. A work whose meager results are still so fundamentally obscure three years after its creation isn't worth the high price its performers have had to pay.