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## [American Dance Festival 2008](#)

The 2008 season is over. The debates continue about everything we saw...

**Thursday, June 26, 2008**

### [Yeats' prophecy made manifest](#)

[Ed. note: Brian Howe, a widely ranging culture critic and reporter, writes frequently for the *Independent Weekly* and other publications. He joins us today as a guest blogger.]



*Turning and turning in the widening gyre*

*The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold...*

—W.B. Yeats

ADF, June 25, Reynolds Auditorium. Featured Works: *Rapture* by Khadija Marcia Radin; *aKabi* by Aydin Teker; *Umwelt* by Compagnie Maguy Marin.

These three dances could hardly be more different, yet taken together and in sequence, they seem to comprise a narrative of spiritual disintegration—Yeats' prophecy made manifest.

The center and the gyre were established in the first piece, the Sufi whirling dance *Rapture* by Khadija Marcia Radin. On a stage cast in cool blue, as a narrator recited the truth-seeking poetry of Jelaluddin Rumi, Radin drew us into a comforting maze of ritual. She twirled in one place, first slowly and with great restraint, then faster, with accumulating gesture and

inflection, as if caught up in the great eddies of the music's yawning vowels. Eventually, she broke free from her stable axis to twirl in ellipses around the center she'd abandoned. At the time it felt like freedom, although later, after the two subsequent pieces developed the narrative, it would feel like a symbolic prelude to deracination—the center's breaking point. The gyre that Radin widened would soon fly apart, accelerating like the cosmos itself.

The central conceit of Aydin Teker's *aKabi* is the dancers' footwear—absurdly high platform shoes, hard to judge precisely from the audience, but appearing to be at least a foot high, if not more. [In my last ADF post](#), I wrote about how dance can reveal the beauty and grace underlying the awkwardness we perceive in bodies, but this piece did the exact opposite—the dancers' grace was deliberately compromised by their awkward footwear. The effect of the piece was disquieting, and not just because of the nagging feeling that someone was bound to break an ankle. It began in pitch darkness as the dancers floundered noisily onstage, their shoes making a sound like amplified, irregular rainfall. There was pleasure in their geometric contortions, but the real power of the piece resided in the dancers' exaggerated presences. When they came into the light, swaying like reeds on their high shoes, affectless and impassive, they were weird and powerful—mutants, or gods, but more like both. The impression is difficult to convey except by insinuation. At times they implied divers or strange frogs; at times, club-footed gymnasts. There was something primordial about the piece—creatures rising up from the muck, learning how to use their inefficient bodies. They were quivering, willowy, overly long, with the distorted perspective of divinity, walking toward us tentatively yet inexorably, like Easter Island heads made embodied and animate. It occurs to me now that, had the night opened with this piece, followed by *Rapture*, it would have strengthened the sense of intra-piece narrative development—the creatures rise from the ooze in *aKabi*, develop spirituality and morality in *Rapture*, and dissolve into the postmodern haze in *Umwelt*.



It's a good job that the brilliant, frustrating *Umwelt* closed the night, as it perfectly capped the sequence and left the audience exhausted (it is a daunting piece). Three guitars were supine at the front edge of the stage, as a mechanical pulley drew a long cord across their strings, creating an abstract, harrowing threnody. At the back of the stage, an assemblage of reflective plastic sheets implied both dressing rooms (shorthand for consumer culture) and a hall of mirrors (shorthand for postmodern confusion), a conflation that would be driven home in a manner not at all ambiguous. The gale-force sound of the guitars was paralleled by actual wind blown across the mirrored assemblage, so it trembled and violently distorted all reflections, spewing wavering curtains of light onto the stage—a set piece I can only describe as Lynchian. The dancers moved in and out of various compartments in visually rhyming

groups, rehearsing rituals of consumption: trying on clothes, eating food, smoking, carrying house plants. Gradually the piece became less playful and more overtly dystopian—items jumbled and recombined illogically as in a Jan Svankmajer short, fights broke out, at times an individual dancer would stop to stare bewildered at the audience, seeming a prisoner to the howling stage, marooned in a mirror-world of synthesized desire and recursive consumption made hellishly literal. It was like witnessing a mass psychogenic fugue, the death throes of a culture with no identity beyond clothing, mass market products, ritual ablations signifying nothing. It was devastating.



If *Umwelt*'s symbolic payload doesn't exactly sound subtle, that's because it's not. The piece was technically brilliant, but made its point much too quickly to justify its excessive length. As it dragged on interminably, it became enervating—which is surely part of the point, that the consumer's life is interminable and enervating and crushingly repetitive—but still. I do think this piece needed to extend beyond the point of comfort to be powerful, and to draw the audience fully into its strange yet familiar, claustrophobic world. But it went too far. I found myself at first entranced, then wholly submerged, as if the drama being enacted onstage were the only thing in the world. But as the piece dragged on beyond this point of immersion, I came out the other side of that state and became again aware of watching people act out a rather pedantic drama (and judging from the several parties of spectators I noticed bowing out at intervals, I wasn't alone in this). I have to reiterate that this is a brilliant piece, a don't-miss performance as long as you've a high threshold for existential dread. And its point may seem obvious, but we've yet to take it to heart—that you are what you consume is a logical impossibility by any definition of the word “consume,” yet it is the tacit assumption that animates our culture. One simply wishes *Umwelt* would make that point concisely enough to leave us in that spellbound state of heightened awareness, rather than belaboring it into eventual tedium, and bludgeoning us into the same befogged daze it wants to howl against. —  
*Brian Howe*

posted by Denise at 2:14 pm