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TIME AND SPACE

A forum for critical discussion of contemporary art, performance, and politics.

Dispatches: aKabi by Aydin Teker, Festival Transamériques, Montreal



Was I ever pumped to see *aKabi*! I missed the show when it played at Springdance in Utrecht, so I was pretty overjoyed to have the chance to catch it in Montreal. I try not to judge a show based on its poster images, but those shots of the dancers in giant platform shoes were so compelling for me, if only because they brought back fond memories of my rave days. The show was choreographed by Turkish dance artist [Aydin Teker](#), who's a bit a legend in Europe, and featured among others, Ayşe Orhon who choreographed *Can You Repeat*, one of my favourite pieces at Springdance this year.

The show started with a long blackout. I mean a seriously long blackout. Long enough that people in the audience started asking each other if something was wrong. I did have a slight moment of panic myself, realizing that I was seated dead centre in the massive Salle Pierre-Mercure, and probably wouldn't make it out alive if there was a rush for the exits. Just when it started to seem like there was a major problem, the light began to come up on stage very slowly and we could gradually make out the shapes of the dancers, perched in their platform shoes. Once the lights were fully up, the dancers...well, they didn't do anything. Didn't fucking move a muscle, for what felt like at least five minutes. There was a lot of uncomfortable coughing and shuffling in the audience, people wondering a loud what was going on and why they'd paid to see people stand still. Then slowly, the realization dawned on us that the dancers actually were moving, albeit incredibly slowly. Slowly enough that unless you stared at them for five minutes, and realized that they had actually changed position, you wouldn't know they were moving at all.

The show gradually got more dynamic, though it was still punctuated with these intensely long moments of stillness. A least ten people in front of me got up and walked out before it was over, perhaps feeling frustrated that they had come to see dance with hardly any dancing. As I was watching the piece, I started to wonder whether or not something is worth watching, simply because it's hard to do. I've had this discussion with dance artists before, especially when it comes to works in which the dancers make incredibly difficult acts of synchronization or slowness seem incredibly easy. Am I as an audience member to find my satisfaction, not because the picture presented on stage is compelling, but because I know it was incredibly difficult to create?

It's a hard question, and one that's gotten me into more than a few drunken bar arguments. Part of me wants to say yes, that watching something that lots of other incredibly well trained dance artists couldn't do on stage, should make for a compelling evening of performance, because of the challenge that's associated with it. The other part of me, that wants to say no, feels like I need something more than that. I want to love a piece of work that's hard to perform and love artists for taking risks and doing things that are hard to do, but sometimes the work just doesn't resonate with me.

I think it might come back to how I've changed the way in which I want to understand performance works at this point in my life. In the early part of my career I was much more apt to take things at surface value, where as now I find the need to go deeper, to find out more about the artists and what they are doing, to dialogue. If I wasn't willing to do those things (and lots of people who see art are not) how would I understand the work? More specifically, if the artist hasn't provided me with the tools to understand a piece of work within the context its being presented, should I be expected to go and seek out the answers on my own? I feel like I have to do that for myself, but more because if I'm going to say that I don't like something I feel like I need to be incredibly prepared to back it up. In essence, I hate being wrong.

I got into an argument about these issues on a programming jury I was part of a few years ago. There was a particular piece that we were thinking about programming, but in order for the audience to understand it, there would need to be some program notes, clarifying what the artist was doing. I liked the piece a lot and suggested that we should include it and add the notes to the program so that people would understand what they were seeing. This sparked an intense debate in the room about whether or not a piece of art must be able to "Speak For Itself". I don't recall how programming situation ended up, though I remember the discussion ended with me walking out of the room.

So here's a question: What should we as audiences expect from artists in terms of information necessary to contextualize, understand, and presumably appreciate their work? What should we as artists be expected to give our audiences, as far as tools for understanding what we do? What role should critics (and I don't mean just me) play in this process. What do you think?

Oh, right. I have to finish writing about *aKabi*. As far as my final reaction to the piece, I had moments where I found it infuriating, but at the same time I walked out loving it. It's a piece of work that takes a lot of patience, and probably could do with repeated watchings. Though I spent a large part of the performance in dialogue with myself regarding the relationship between how artists create their work and how audiences understand it, ultimately I left satisfied, if only for the fact that I now had a new set of questions to ponder.



Labels: [AYDIN TEKER](#), [DISPATCHES](#)

1 comments:

[Katherine](#) said...

Here are my two (or possibly three) cents on the matter:

If I want to see something technically difficult but which has no artistic merit, I watch gymnastics. And from time to time I do love to watch gymnastics, for exactly that reason: because it's extremely hard to do and I am in awe of those who can. But here's the question – if you put gymnastics in a theatre and called it art, would it be significant artistically? I think if I went to a theatre expecting to see art, and saw instead gymnastics transferred to a theatre space, I would feel pretty gypped (sp?).

I have also sat through a lot of dance pieces in which I thought, “That movement looks really fun/challenging to do. I bet those dancers are enjoying themselves.” And the moment I feel that the people onstage are having more fun than I am, I feel discounted as an audience member. If you want to dance and do incredibly difficult and challenging things, fine. Do it in the privacy of your studio. But don't invite me in to watch it unless there is something in it for me.

That said, it sounds like the piece you were watching may have had merit that some people appreciated and others did not. At least, from the sounds of it, they bought some of that slow time with visually interesting interludes.

As for the subject of program notes, I think anything that enhances the relationship between performer and audience is a good thing. That said, I also agree that a performance should be able to "Stand on its own." Therefore artists who feel that audiences will more easily connect with their work by reading some sort of introduction or essay on the creation of the piece, should be allowed to make that writing available. But on the flip side, any audience member who doesn't want to read extra material should be able to enjoy a piece of art on its own merit.

How's that for an evenly balanced argument?

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