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**Spring Loaded 2008**

by Donald Hutera

'We're trying to catch people at a particular moment in their careers,' explains Eddie Nixon, the curator of Spring Loaded. Held annually at The Place, London's premier small-scale dance venue, in 2008 this six week season thrust nearly two dozen companies or choreographers into the spotlight. 'Some are five, six or even ten years down the line making their own work, maybe alongside a career as a dancer; they might not have enough of a track record to attract a decent enough grant to fulfill their ambitions. But they're on the cusp, with the potential to become some of the biggest voices in dance in the next few years, and we want to support them.'

Commendable intentions, but with what results? Of the five evenings I caught, Ben Wright's met high standards of craft and feeling while that by Robin Dingemans successfully took more original, creative risks than any young British-based dance piece I've seen of late. As for the others, read on.

Sense of Self, an intuitively assembled kinetic contemplation of black female identity, was a collaboration between UK resident Laila Diallo and fellow Canadian Melanie Demers. Long, slender and bony, Diallo danced with Wayne McGregor's company Random. Supported by Jacques Poulin-Denis' textured, shape-shifting score, she and Demers used various props – a gorilla mask, menacing orange heels, printed words (in pain, in vain, etc), cardboard boxes filled with black balloons – and several sorts of movement material to obliquely convey their ideas. Diallo flattened herself insect-like against the back wall before slithering over the floor bound Demers.

In another good physical bit they swiftly folded and looped round each other as if both were trying to be the container and the contained. At one point Diallo attached a white shadow to the prone Demers, raising her up to daub red bullet holes on it. Memorably, too, Demers covered herself in a large, shaggy brown pelt almost as if she'd been consumed body and soul by a bear. The work didn't amount to a full meal, but the tasty nibbles it served were prepared with care and wit.

Roadkill Café is the second full-length work from Frauke Requardt, a German choreographer who's danced in Lea Anderson's *The Cholmondeleys*. Her new quintet was a weird, dreamily theatricalised mix of music (mainly jazz, and composed by John Zorn) and intentionally meandering, repetitive movement that referenced cultural symbols (cowboys, strippers, angels) in a manner suggestive of a David Lynch film. The cast featured a loquacious, ukulele-playing cowpoke, a pair of Sapphic, pseudo-identical twins and a human dog lip-syncing to Willie Nelson. Hannah Clark's designs (a stage surrounded by iridescent midnight blue curtains) and Chahine Yavroyan's nocturnal coloured lighting enhanced the woozy mood of a frankly confounding experience that nevertheless offered odd moments of pleasure.

As indicated above, the most satisfying of my Spring Loaded nights were by Dingemans, formerly of Protein Dance, and Wright. Having previously performed with or for Ricochet, Stan Won't Dance and Matthew Bourne, the latter has carved out a reputation as a choreographer/director of opera and theatre. An impressive triple bill dubbed the diminishing present this year launched his company bgroup, the dances in it passing with unobtrusive maturity from concern with the self to the other to the collective.

Commissioned by the Robin Howard Foundation, Zoi Dimitriou's *Goddesses in Exile* was another female duet questioning assumptions and expectations associated with gender. In it Juliette Barton and the Greek-born Dimitriou graduated from goddessy poses to bare-backed beasts. This last incarnation was the striking climax to an intelligent if derivative 30-minute work that merits further refinement of themes and execution. Words (e.g., hysterical, needy, obsessive and, mostly, divine) were taped to the floor or the dancers' skin. More effective was Reynaldo Young's sound design, brilliantly manipulating the warmly babbling voice of the unique (and uncredited performer Sally Marie).

The elegantly composed, slightly obscure solo Dromi confirmed Dimitriou's interest in text. Uncoiling like a mythical thread the microphone cord round her neck, she used it to define an island-like stage space across which she proceeded to swirl with smooth limpidity. A spare narrative about an isolated man was delivered both live and as voice-over. I enjoyed watching Dimitriou move without feeling moved myself in any particular direction by this dance.

Wright favours lower-case titles. *thought latching onto thought* and *pulling* was his beautifully slippery, sensitive entry for the 2006 Place Prize. Set to Tim Sutton's wonderfully supple flute music, this mysterious male quartet posits a shadowy world (superbly lit by Guy Hoare) inhabited by four young men in clingy t-shirts who could be a single person. Hints of a slightly anxious drama blended to great effect with vigorous dancing, all sharpness and curves. A duet for the excellent Robert Clark and Delphine Gaborit, Wright's *passing strange* and *wonderful* turned us into voyeurs witnessing a sweaty, nuanced relationship ambiguously constructed out of tender intimacy and argumentative tension. Finally, *small acts* was a glancing exercise in individual versus group dynamics and behaviour. In their colourfully mismatched street clothing, the five dancers intermittently tapped into this deliberately desultory piece's humanising delicacy. Because Wright seems to have nothing to prove, he can simply get on with the business of discovering how to concoct the best dances within his grasp. This quintet may not yet be one of them, but it did nothing to detract from my estimation of his potential.

Dingemans is a gangly wild man and Joanne Fong, his even more unbridled partner in *ME + YOU = 5*, a Dionysian dynamo. Together this inspired duo devised a novel show about interpersonal communication and the complexity of being alive that was by turns comic, rapturous, raw, stimulating, playful, thoughtful, excessive and, at times, peculiarly touching. Like other Spring Loaded performances it featured balloons (white, and spiraling balletically thanks to strategically placed electric fans – a gorgeous, strange opening image) and written words, plus video footage that amplified both the piece's content and each dancer's stage persona. Ultimately *ME + YOU = 5* reached parts other dance productions don't, in part because Dingemans cared enough about us not to manipulate our responses. ●