

PORT

FACT/SF and LACDC present

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ODC Theater, San Francisco

September 15th, 2017

Contemporary creators have innovation in their blood, constantly pushing and testing the artistic landscape. Whether through choreographic language, performance sites, collaborative devices, technological elements, narrative content or structural form, they mine for newness over and over again. FACT/SF has long been part of that tradition, committed to growth, new approaches to physicality and transforming the notion of performance. In addition, the company, led by Artistic Director Charles Slender-White is a pioneer in arts programming, seeking to identify the needs of artists and of the field, and working to develop and create series and residencies that respond. They championed JuMP, Just Make A Piece, encouraging choreographers to do just that, create work without constraints or expectations. And this past weekend saw the debut of another landmark project, a joint venture between FACT/SF and LACDC, LA Contemporary Dance Company, under the Artistic Direction of Genevieve Carson. PORT, or Peer Organized Regional Touring, is a brand new platform, hoping to make touring more of a reality for small/mid-sized dance companies and encourage artistic dialogue between regions. PORT's inaugural edition features shared quadruple bills in both San Francisco and Los Angeles (at LA Theatre Center) during the month of September.

All four of the works on the San Francisco program at ODC Theater were premieres, two world premieres from FACT/SF and two San Francisco premieres by LACDC. In the first and third pieces of the evening - *an(n)a.07*, a solo choreographed and danced by Slender-White, and excerpts from Carson's *Stimulaze* – the relationship between music and movement was paramount. As the lights slowly rose on *an(n)a.07*, J.S. Bach's complex contrapuntal sound penetrated the space. Slender-White began a short movement motif, which eventually grew and developed, accumulating more and more intricate phrase material. There were moments of charged stillness, coupled with intensely strong technical positions (a deep lunge in fourth position) and living postures, including a phenomenal grand plié, also in fourth. Bach's fugues and inventions have certain structural elements present – a subject, sometimes referred to as the theme, answers and countersubjects – all of which are woven together to create one large, cohesive compositional statement. In *an(n)a.07*, a title which aptly includes the name of Bach's wife, Slender-White was brilliantly demonstrating how present-day live choreographic material can act as one of these structural elements - a relevant, contributing independent/interdependent voice, conversing in real-time with a score composed hundreds of years prior.

Carson's quartet, *Stimulaze*, also began with the music of the Baroque master, J.S. Bach, and again, we witnessed an artistic back and forth, though here it was between four dancers performing different strands of movement. In Carson's theatrical container, the quartet overlapped and intersected, and while each choreographic idea was distinct, all shared an incredible fluidity and legato intention. Very much like the score. Then things shifted. The four dancers began purposely bumping shoulders, pulling and pushing each other backward and forward in space. And the music morphed as well, this time into work by W.A. Mozart, a composer synonymous with 18th century classicism, where music composition was very much about following specific rules, formulas and formats. In this part of *Stimulaze*, the choreography was acting against that structure. The dancers were playing a game of will, exertion and control (and a humorous one at that), refusing to 'stay in their lane'. *Stimulaze's* juxtaposition of movement working with the music and then conversely working in opposition to it was extremely satisfying.

The remaining two works, *EBBA* (LACDC) and *Remains* (FACT/SF) took the audience on a journey, a descent into the mysterious land of the deconstructed narrative. Neither told a linear story, but both were very clearly steeped in and inspired by the human condition.

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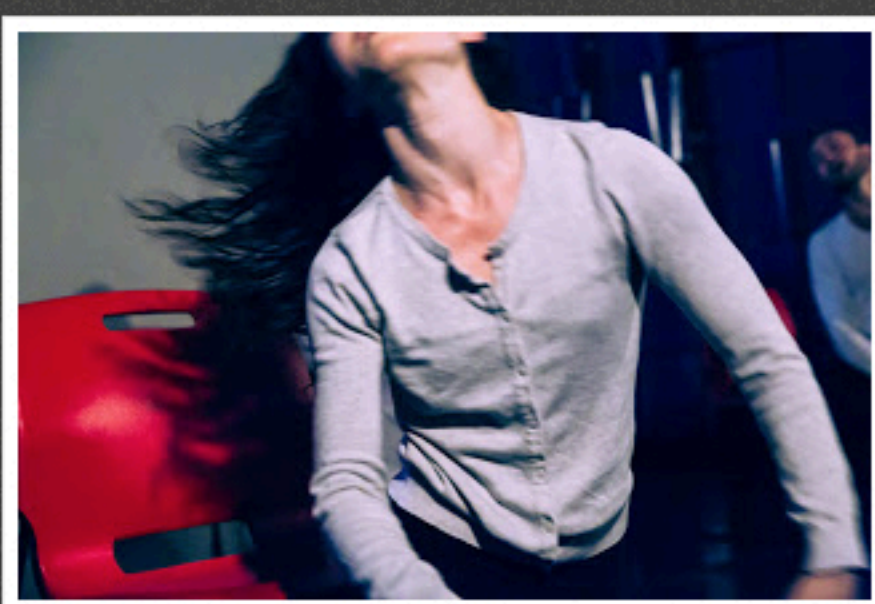


LACDC's Drea Sobke and Ashlee Merritt in *EBBA*
Photo Taso Papadakis

A pounding, vibrating bass line shook the entire theater as the LACDC dance artists entered one by one from opposite sides of the stage for *EBBA*. They toggled between stretchy, undulating slow motion positions and quick, traveling, transitional steps. An animalistic-like growl was layered into the score, similarly mirrored in many of the choreographic postures. Forceful dynamic changes and jazz-based phrase material leapt from the

stage, the movement creating an atmospheric sense of purposeful uncertainty and insecurity. And there was a very clear extreme being explored – that of the individual and the collective. At the beginning of the piece, it felt like each dancer in the eight-member female ensemble was navigating their surroundings on their own. Inhabiting the same space as others, but not with any kind of kinship. As *EBBA* progressed, this isolation and lone-ness was replaced by a sense of the group, of the collective. Speaking of the group, the LACDC company dancers had excellent spatial awareness, able to be completely in the moment, fully committed to the movement with no collisions. And they were able to do so without making the ODC stage look crowded. The only challenge in the piece was the score, or more specifically the booming bass pulse in the score. It might have just been the size of the theater, but everything was shaking pretty intensely for almost the entire dance, and it did distract a little from what was happening visually.

Six FACT/SF company dancers made their way to the stage, each carrying a plastic 3D shell mannequin figure of themselves. Once these shells had been distributed around the space, the ensemble made their way to upstage right to begin *Remains'* first movement phrase – a choreographic expression of sweeping arms and legs told along a circuitous path. As they arrived in place, the mood radically changed. Slow contorted motions and screeching vocal sounds unfolded; the theme of anguish ringing clear. Structurally, *Remains* channeled repetition and accumulation devices, with highly physical motifs overlaying each other. And for a good portion of the work, the cast faced the back of the stage. This facing brought egalitarianism into the picture – the dancers could have been anyone. Mid-way through *Remains*, the performers squirmed on the floor trying desperately to make it to a seated position on a chair. Once they finally accomplished this task, they violently fell to the floor with percussive and rhythmic full body physicality. And they would try again, make it, and then lose once more; succeeding and falling, succeeding and falling, succeeding and falling. This was interspersed with a clock-like shaking of the head, in a 'no' attitude. The shells would come back toward the end of the dance, in a nurturing, protective sequence, complete with LED lights that were breathed into the structures. But for me, it was the chair sequence that felt the essence of *Remains*. The continual up and down signaling the never-ending, relentless cycle of human emotion and the blindsiding power of grief and angst.



FACT/SF's Michaela Burns
Photo Kegan Marling