thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: JH Kertis

Human Exploration: Rhythm, Time, and Light

by Ama Gora

5:31 AM || I look over to the clock. The dance has begun. I imagine myself as the performer, my eyes slowly opening to a squint. My body tingling as a sign that it is awakening too.

10:31 AM || I'm sitting on my bed with my laptop, familiarizing myself with Vervet Dance. Founder and director Loren Groenendaal is presenting *In the Light* for the third time this year. The work is a fifteen-hour durational piece which explores natural rhythms through dance and music. The Iron Factory is on the north side of Philadelphia, where I currently reside, and I'm allowed to come and go as I please throughout the performance. Choice is powerful incentive.

11:15AM || Entering the space, I'm captivated immediately by the deteriorating brick wall, a faint shade of neon green and brown blending effortlessly. Four large, open windows are spilling out rectangular pools of light onto a black marley. A sense of calm washes over me.

12:00 PM || A dancer is looming over a xylophone playing tunes which synchronize with his neighbor. Two drummers sit on the floor transforming metal miniature cookware into drums. To their right one performer lightly taps a djembe with his fingers. My ears perk up.

Days later, I will be frustrated. I won't be able to place arms, legs, and faces in the space; the music will be all I can remember. As the work unfolds, I find that the excavation of "natural rhythm" is only present during the improvised musical accompaniment. The physicality of the dancers' relationship to rhythm feels uninvestigated.

However, I do recall a lean dancer upstage in an eggshell-white dress. He rocks back and forth on his feet, interrupting the pools of light on the marley, his shadow dancing with him on the wall. It is simple, beautiful, even captivating, but I wonder again about progression.

The repetition of his rocking becomes flat and I'm no longer interested. Is this the intent? To repeat the rhythm to a dulling space? What would it look like if the rhythm is carried through itself and transformed into something new?

1:00 PM || Back in an Uber, I think about the packed lunch and mason jar on my desk. I arrive at my home and I replenish myself with the contents in my lunch bag, guzzling down water to quench my thirst. I think of pulling out my laptop and writing, but I want to wait to see the whole performance, so I write nothing. I rest my eyes. I watch an episode of *The Office*. I turn around and realize it is 6:30 pm. I call another Uber.

7:00 PM || My second entrance feels performative. I've become part of the work. I am confident as I walk up the stairs. Time slips by more slowly than earlier; the windows provide contrast as I notice the darkness of the shadows emerging on top of the dancers' heads and on the sides of their bodies, creating shapes.

7:30 PM || The shadows seem to be dancing too, transforming the dancers, adding much-needed dynamism. I am more fascinated with the shadows than the dancing. There are many memorable moments throughout the work, but they gnaw at my patience, as the energetic qualities of the dancers as a whole often maintain a constant rhythm. My eyes travel to a soloist who is playing the flute and softly swaying. The music of the flute matches the energetic level of her head and shoulders. As she moves, so do the notes. She is picturesque; I'm reminded of a flip book. With each picture-moment the sway evolves.

Do all the performers have the same level of experience? The semi-composed nature of the work may be too nonspecific for unseasoned dance performers. It seems that a clear idea is not always being established, thus the dancing after several repetitions loses its initial drive. Groenendaal may be challenging ideas of what can and cannot be considered performative.

8:48 PM || One light comes on and I jump, surprised. Then another and then all at once the lights come on.

8:51 PM || I look over at my clock; the dance is over.

I leave a bit annoyed, but curious. How has the dance changed since its first presentation? I am more intrigued by the concept of natural rhythms through the use of music than the physical execution. Natural rhythm feels uninvestigated. There is patterning and repetition within the improvised phrase work, but during my time as the audience member, I do not see this evolve. Rhythm has potential, in a fully explored state, to go beyond the mundane. Yet, Groenendaal's ideas and concepts are inherently provocative and interesting.

Vervet Dance, *In the Light*, The Iron Factory, June 16, 5:31AM - 8:51PM

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