

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

The Importance of a Witness: Faye Driscoll “Informs” Philadelphia

By Debbie Shapiro

When an independent choreographer from the outside passes through the hometown Philly scene, it's always refreshing. In these moments I've found that our tendencies to cling to our individual identities or play the “who's who in the crowd game” float away. The post-show mingling feels warmer and more cohesive, perhaps because none of us are under the pressure to perform, and—if only for an evening—we leave that part up to the temporary visitor.

In the case of New Yorker Faye Driscoll's recent visit to Philadelphia, our community had access to an intensive weekend workshop, capped off with an open-to-the-public “informance.” This was thanks to Philadelphia Dance Project's guest curator, local choreographer Meg Foley. An in- formance, unlike a per- formance, allows an artist to present his or her work in a colloquial fashion-- no fancy costumes or lights. On February 18th at the Performance Garage, Driscoll alternated between speaking candidly with the audience about her creative process and showing phrases of unfinished movement material with help from collaborator Jesse Zaritt.

“What we do is fragile,” said the boyish, yet self-possessed Driscoll about being a choreographer. Standing next to a podium (because she “felt funny standing behind it”), she said “we labor away, put ourselves in front of the instability of praise and adulation. If those things weren't there would we still do it? If the highs and lows weren't there? Yes I would,” she declares, “as long as there's a witness, even if they're totally neutral. Our work doesn't exist, doesn't come into relief, until there's the dynamic of audience and performer.”

Before Driscoll completed her next thought, Zaritt entered the space, grabbed her hand, and led her tenderly into the beginning of what would be the first showing of work. A section of intricately worked out morphing followed: over and over, two bodies performed seconds of phrases, pausing together at specific times just long enough for us to register a still image, and sometimes acting out a bit of a scene from a silent film. Evidence of much virtuosic dance training peeked through, but it wasn't showcased. Later Driscoll would reveal that “so much of the meaning in her work comes from randomness” and her “landscape is created through collecting and rapidly layering images next to each other to reveal a third universe.”

Driscoll's work is concerned with different states of being— some are situational and contextualized, like a ballet pas de deux, taking a shower, or making up post-argument, and some a more internalized embodiment of an emotion, such as absurdity or despair. She scrap-books the human experience, but instead of decoupage she applies structures of live performance.

As Driscoll and Zaritt transitioned into the next section, they worked hard to keep up with the silent metronome that paced their quickly moving slideshow. They travelled towards the audience, where a colorful pile of props awaited. Like two wildly imaginative, attention-deprived children, they played with a selection of household items to try and score a reaction from the audience. Driscoll straddled Zaritt, and he handed the items, one by one, to Driscoll, resulting in a hilarious, goofy mess of scarves, wigs, fruit, and baby powder, punctuated by cartoonish facial expressions. The mercurial clown show starkly contrasted with the quiet concentration of the audience. With the exception of a few giggles, no soundtrack accompanied this scene.

Then suddenly the mood became heavy, with Zaritt in the background quietly applauding Driscoll's performance while she cut right through the audience with the intensity of her now very serious gaze. Through the subsequent speech, we learned that Driscoll grew up

in dance studios, and felt that her time there brought her to life, whereas her invisibility at home as a child of divorce proved more challenging to navigate. She shared with us that she's interested in the constant inescapability of relationships in her new work, *You're Me*, and a demonstration of that work-in-process followed.

In this section some of the props returned. Driscoll and Zaritt each put a wig in their mouth and invented battling monster personas. A repeated pattern of heavy atmosphere balanced out with extreme silliness began to emerge. They played and goofed off, and then again, the channel changed and Driscoll collapsed to the floor into a stinging, soulful sob. In this moment I thought about her parents (who I only know from what she said before she began dancing).

The showing continued with more playful props, mirroring, and then sound was added for the first time in the evening. To this track of a snowy, static loop, they pushed and pulled, back and forth, as if swimming, and the whole evening blurred together now with a dream-like quality.

The presentation concluded with a few clips of past works. One was an excerpt of the 2010 Dance Theater Workshop premiere of *There is so Much Mad in Me* and the other, *Loneliness*, was a project exploring choreography by editing still images together. These videos along with Driscoll's remarks throughout the evening, delivered a multi-dimensional view of her identity as an artist, fueling anticipation for the unveiling of her next finished piece.

Faye Driscoll's Next Performance:

You're Me, The Kitchen, April 12 – 21, www.thekitchen.org

By Debbie Shapiro

March 7, 2012