thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Bill Hebert

Really, It Is Kind of Huge

by Megan Bridge

I went to see “Experiencing people as really kind of huge” by BodyFields Performance Collective last Friday. BodyFields was founded by Nikki Roberts and Briel Driscoll while they were undergrads at Temple in the not-so-distant past. A quick look at the company’s website and marketing information for Fringe told me two things that make me really glad that the Philly dance scene is attracting, and keeping, artists like these. First, “BodyFields strives to make art accessible to a larger economic group. Their show this year will be $5-$20 sliding scale....a system of payment that encourages economic equality because it offers different prices based on self-assigned income brackets.” Smart dancers with an articulated (and socially conscious) economic agenda. I like them already. Second, the bios on the site reveal a kind of curiosity and openness about physicality that I think many young dancers are hard-pressed to articulate, especially so fresh out of academia. For Shailer Kern-Carruth, "Process takes first priority in her work as she searches for understanding rather than definition."

The dancers entered in a tangle of movement, slowly traversing the space (the Parish Room at the First Unitarian Church at 21st and Chestnut). Their faces revealed a self-conscious grace. I could feel them feel us watching them. Not quite Deborah Hay’s “inviting being seen,” this collective presence was younger, more nervous, but somehow also self-aware. The traveling six-headed cuddle-puddle resolved into a duet between dancers Megan Quinn and Bobby Szafranski. She tried to squeeze into his pocket. They worked together; there was none of the competitive posturing I’ve grown accustomed to seeing in a lot of younger companies’ work. In fact, all the dancers seemed joined by commitment to a common task: to be embodied, watchful, and open to possibility. The dancing wasn’t about “success” or “failure” or looking beautiful. But it also wasn’t *not* about these things.

BodyFields was joined, for this performance, by collaborators Son Step, a local Philly band with a new album coming out next month. The sound was all crashing waves of gorgeousness, and the musicians were easy on the eyes in their clingy and coordinated teal and beige sweats. The tones were mellow, clear, and heavy; the basses (one electric, one upright)--buzzy and visceral. Lush vocals made

me want to snuggle up inside this quartet's enveloping harmonies.

A crash of kick drum and cymbals from Son Step served as an instantaneous transition to more "localized" percussion...dancer Jonathan Childs with Szafranski picked up on-stage instruments (including a ukelele) and started strumming and beating time. The four women performed a lively dance that never left the floor--all slithering rhythmic kicks, crunches, flips of the hips, and side bends. I saw bruised shins.

The next few sections fell apart a bit for me. The dancer-musicians had nothing on Son Step, their loops were repetitive and an effort towards group singing didn't go quite far enough. A treatment of text about a whale seemed a bit thrown away.

But when it took the dancers a long (really long) time to melt to the floor and create a chain of bodies across the stage in slow motion, I also had the time to sit back and reflect on how this kind of dancing reminds me how good it feels to have a body. I wonder if others in the audience can relate kinesthetically in the same way or if this is just a dancer thing. In the slowness I find myself being drawn to watch how one dancer's big toe slides over another's calf... and I can somehow see how it feels because of the dancers' quiet openness to each other's physicality. I sense that they trust each other, that they know each other's bodies in a way that comes only out of repetition, out of familiarity with structures. All of this reminds me of a book I read recently, and I can see these dancers working through ideas of physical intelligence. They are at home in their bodies, at home in making, and I can just tell that they are having a rip-roaring good time.

BodyFields Performance Collective and Son Step, Experiencing people as really kind of huge, First Unitarian Church, 2125 Chestnut St. September 20, 7:30pm, September 21, 9pm. http://livearts-fringe.ticketleap.com/experiencing-people-as-really-kind-of-huge/dates/Sep-20-2012_at_0700PM

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