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Photo: Mike Hurwitz

1096: An Artistic Journey

By Carolyn Merritt and Patricia Graham

Carolyn Merritt and Patricia Graham attended the second installment of flamenco company Pasión y Arte and postmodern company Fresh Blood's artistic collaboration, a work-in-progress presented as part of this year's Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts (PIFA). An investigation of women's stories and the meeting of two distinct movement forms, 1096 takes its title from the birth year of Trotula of Salerno, the first female gynecologist. Pasión y Arte Artistic/ Executive Director Elba Hevia y Vaca was accompanied by dancer Amelie Hernandez, *cantaor* (singer) Ismael de la Rosa, and guitarist Raphael Brunn, while Fresh Blood director KC Chun-Manning was joined by dancers Jen Morley and Olive Prince. The writers discussed the performance by phone and wove snippets of conversation with further musings in the following text, a meeting of two different approaches to writing that mimics, in its own way, the dialogue of *1096*.

CM: The site, Fleisher Art Memorial's Sanctuary, was so fundamental to my experience of *1096*. Opening night was also First Friday, and we had to weave through noisy packs of plastic cup-wielding hipsters in the gallery to get to the space. Stepping through the door was disorienting, perhaps like time travel. Inside felt like a sanctuary – cavernous and containing with its vaulted ceilings, stone saints, peeling surfaces. I'd been there once before, but found myself happily in awe again, pulled towards something like reverence. It breaks my heart to know the next installation of the work won't be there.

PG: I witnessed the power of this collaboration in February at a work-progress showing staged in a simple black box theater. For this second performance, *1096* took full advantage of the non-theatrical setting. I loved how the dance wound through the Sanctuary and we followed along, choosing our own juxtapositions of spiraling bodies and linear passageways.

CM: Me too. The lead and follow was so well balanced, the performance and space seamless; they guided our viewing toward

exploration quite masterfully.

The song and dance were so powerful, really complete unto themselves, yet the narrative felt unfinished. Jen Morley's opening recitation prepared me to locate certain ideas and stereotypes–"ally," "serpent," "temptation"–in the movement vocabulary and encounters between the dancers. But I craved more stories. Who is Eve? What does she represent to us, to women, today? And who was Trotula of Salerno? We learned that she was the first female gynecologist, that her birth year inspired the work's title, but then she was dropped. I wanted to know so much more.

PG: It did seem like the text was truncated and then for me, forgotten, perhaps drowned, in the wave of music that followed. Yes, I agree, why are these women who were named important to us now? I reflected on the earlier version of this work I saw, a duet between Elba and KC with a single drum for accompaniment. It did not include text and yet within the relationships of sound, space and the movement dialogue created by the two of them, I got so much content regarding these two specific women. The Fleisher performance contained this duet and layered more than a dollop of sensory richness with the setting, music and additional dancers; new layers of information appeared. I see my response to the two performances as a contrast between how deeply I perceived the subtext of the piece in a minimal setting versus the surge of being swept away in a pageant of beauty, emotion and skill at the Fleisher Sanctuary.

CM: I also wanted to know more about these women in front of us. Olive is pregnant, Jen just gave birth, Elba is a grandmother, KC is a mother. Each is obviously more than this, but their bodies hint at stories we can't help but interpret.

PG: Yes, our stories come through our bodies. The vibration of those narratives is in each cell as we perform before an audience. Through their presence, these women bring forward the dynamic of their own experience, and watching, we perceive their stories on a gut level.

CM: There were so many striking images for me: Olive cradling her stomach between movements; KC's unending spirals, stretching beyond finger and toe tips; the portable '*zapateo*' floors transformed into wooden briefcases in the modern dancers' swinging Sufi spins; Olive's suffocating duet with the *bata de cola*, that impossibly long ruffled skirt and ultimate symbol of clichéd femininity in flamenco; Elba and Amelie's concluding gestures–to heavens, chest, hips, stomp–linking women to earth and sky; Jen and KC's triumphant final dance, around and atop the skirt.... Perhaps the most striking was the opening of Elba and KC's duet: Elba, erect and defiantly turned away from us, KC in a curved shoulderstand, her feet softly climbing Elba's back. In the meeting of the two forms, I saw two competing images of women effectively integrated–soft, compliant and supportive vs. strong, unyielding and leading. Society tends to place these archetypal views of women in opposition, but this duet suggested that perhaps there are other models.

PG: Those convenient little floors. I enjoyed how matter-of-factly Elba and Amelie just walked in, unceremoniously dropped them–a clean, bright smack–then stepped up and start wailing with their feet. No pretense. The intensity of the relationships among the performers was striking, in particular the interplay between the singer, Ismael de la Rosa and the solo dancers. Ismael directed his song to them, coming into their space, standing over them at times, pushing them on and reflecting back; his voice conveying pain, solitude, joy, whether we understood the words in Spanish or not. He sang Alegria to Elba from a distance, and she responded with what seemed like limitless brightness, coming through her face, the surface of her skin. In conversation with Amelie afterwards, she commented on the ability of this great singer, to take her to another level of artistry in her dance.

CM: I *love* watching Elba's face when she dances. Her expression hints at depths I can't reach as a viewer and an outsider to flamenco, while also translating and bringing something very clear and universal to the surface. You mentioned the force of flamenco in our conversation – that you can feel the energy without understanding the specificity. Can you talk more about that?

PG: What I perceive is a very direct and sustained sense of force both within the body and in space. The torso twists with a palpable surge of muscle against muscle. The percussive sound, a tattoo into the nervous system, accelerates heartbeats and breath. The feet stamp and pull us down into the earth, as the sternum rises rebelliously in opposition–the heart standing its ground and rejecting all

insults. I also appreciate the graded subtlety of Elba's facial expressions. It's satisfying to see a dancer bring that three-dimensionality to her performance and makes me wonder whether the use of the face is part of the flamenco training or her own special gift.

CM: I would say it's both. Facial expression appears central to flamenco dance, but I think Elba's power is a product of both singularity and sincerity. Flamenco is rooted in centuries-old suffering, in a time and place so distant. An effective performer not only channels these roots, but temporarily opens a portal of sorts (again, perhaps like time travel) connecting us to that space through feeling. In Elba's case, we believe her; this may not be her particular history, but she has tapped it and brought it back to us.

Do you think this–the force–impeded the integration of the two forms? At times, I felt the flamenco overpowered the modern dance, and I wonder whether there is something to the form itself, its force and strength, that ultimately dominated the modern vocabulary. Perhaps this had more to do with the music than the movement per se, given that the flamenco guitar and *canto* were a constant presence.

PG: Yes, I think the flamenco music dominated the style of the piece-the modern dancers were living in a flamenco world. I believe that how they work with the music and text in its next incarnation will play a significant role in the balance of modern and flamenco sensibilities. Again, the duet between KC and Elba stood out as emblematic of how these worlds can meet, converse and create a language together; they arrive at the crossroad and we anticipate the journey from there.

1096, Pasión y Arte and Fresh Blood, Fleisher Art Memorial, April 5-7.

By Patricia Graham
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