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## Review: Side by Side; November 3, 2007, Julia Morgan Center

by Rachel Howard

Anyone walking down the 2600 block of Berkeley's College Avenue was treated to both a warm evening and a warm scene on the first weekend of November. Outside the Julia Morgan Center for the Arts, a lively crowd milled as Navarrete x Kajiyama Dance Theatre's Jose Navarrete and Debby Kajiyama, powdered ghostly white, traipsed through a macabre "Milonga Sentimental." Making great use of the theater's lawn, awnings, and most memorably the chasm between two benches, the pair made tango and butoh look like the most natural mash-up in the world. They swiveled through ochos, they declaimed Jeanette Winterson poetry, they had Setsuko Nakamura play a tiny toy piano balanced on Kajiyama's head. It was all eerily delightful.

Inside the theater, a mood of pleasant community persisted. For "Side by Side," producer Laura Renaud-Wilson brought together seven Bay Area companies ranging from the peace-promoting feminism of Anne Bluethenthal and Dancers to the outré shock antics of Dandelion Dance Theater. It was good to see them next to one another, and to catch up with some I had not seen in quite some time. There were moments of brave dancing and flashes of intriguing ideas. And yet, with the exception of Navarrete and Kajiyama's delicious "Milonga," a tinge of frustration lingered after each. These are talented dance makers. They can push each other—and themselves—a little harder.

Take, for instance, the best moment from Dandelion Dance Theater's "Dandelion Goulash," a medley of excerpts from three DDT works. Creepily avuncular Stacz Sadowski balanced Anne-Lise Reusswig on his knees, bouncing her up and down as he told the tale of a little girl running and falling down a hole. When he bounced, the girl ran; when the bouncing stopped, she plummeted to the floor; and as the tale kept lengthening into ever more violent renditions, knocking her into tree branches and giving her a good bashing, we laughed at the dread on the girl's face as her puppet master put her through the paces.

This was a good movement idea that made for good theater, and there were a few others: a duet for a man and a one-legged woman with a chorus on the floor behind, legs fan-kicking. There's interesting social discomfort in that. But, even for a medley, too much in this "Goulash" seemed perfectly arbitrary: a man in pink panties just because it looks unattractive, an endless rant of uninteresting sentences all starting with the word "You," a cast of 11 all dressed as distastefully as possible running around with flashlights and screaming to little effect. It's fine that Kupers wants to shock, but he ought to want to do something else, too, and I believe he can. I'd be very interested to see what would happen, for instance, if he set himself the assignment of making a work completely without text, which would force him to dig more into his movement.

Anne Bluethenthal is one choreographer who uses text and yet knows her own movement: cradling, comforting, luscious. Her works have wonderfully creamy movers, and her at the center, such a solid, maternal presence. But in each of the three excerpts on this program, I wanted her to push her movement vocabulary more. There's a fine line between potent universal symbols and clichés; Bluethenthal has been fudging it for too long. Clutching the heart, reaching, cupping the hands bowl-like in the dance "Bowls"—these grow banal if not developed, or set in a surprising context. Laura Elaine Ellis was the wonderfully in-the-moment soloist in "Mama Cariño." A man by the single moniker of Vinsantos provided the dark, Leonard Cohen-like singing and piano in "Sheep."

I have a similar complaint with Paco Gomes, who marries modern dance and Brazilian folk forms. In "Mulheres Do Mar," the modern dance influence seemed to make his style less, rather than more, interesting, those bouncing hunched backs watered down with generic reaches. Nina Haft, meanwhile, presented a solo co-created with the very pregnant performer Jill Randall, "Wake of Your Drive." Randall moved with impressive attack through composer Scott Marshall's warm bath of sound, but I wasn't sure, without the pregnant woman, that the piece had much content.

Moving Arts Dance's Anandha Ray had an acrobatic love duet, "Beyond the Picket Fence;" Paris Wages and Damon Mahoney were sculpted and facially dramatic, but given that this dance is all about being over-the-top, they could have pushed the physical risk-taking more. Facing East Dance and Music's Sue Li Jue offered a lovely premiere, "Budge/Grudge," with tiny Frances Sedayao and Danny Nguyen first playful, then in conflict. Again, if I could push it just a step further, I would have liked more thought behind communicating the why of the shift in mood, rather than contrast for its own sake.

And that was the feeling that followed me out the door of "Side by Side": So much potential. It's difficult to get quality feedback on your work as a choreographer; too often what goes up onstage hasn't received the benefits of constructive criticism. What would happen if the artists in "Side by

Side” didn’t just juxtapose their works, but also swapped candid impressions? Surely it would be more helpful for them to have such a forum than it would be to receive any critic’s judgments.



## About Rachel Howard

Rachel Howard has written about dance in the Bay Area for about 16 years. Her work has appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, the New York Times, Dance Magazine and many other publications. She also writes memoir and fiction.

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