

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

SARAH MICHELSON

THE KITCHEN/P.S. 122

Choreographer Sarah Michelson transforms performance spaces in the most extraordinary ways. For Part I of *Shadowmann* at the Kitchen, she spun the large black-box theater around so that the traditional arrangement of audience and performance was reversed. Bleachers were set up onstage, and the tall entrance doors provided the back wall. At the beginning of the performance, lights went up instead of down, the doors to the Kitchen swung open instead of shut, and all the way, across the street, two spotlit dancers in bright yellow tunics walked in unison down three steps of the building opposite and danced, in small side-to-side motions, into the performance space itself.

For Part II at P.S. 122, Michelson transformed the small downstairs room into a white-carpeted boudoir, with a tightly gathered chintz curtain covering a wall from floor to ceiling. The intimacy of this second act—dancers were within touching distance of the audience—was a perfect counterpoint to the long sight lines in Part I. Both views were grippingly cinematic, as though each distinct locale were a movie location and the eyes of each audience member were cameras, tracking protagonists through interconnected but disjointed scenes. The choreographer's ability to transmogrify architectural spaces became even more apparent when viewing these two sites one after another; together they answered the question, "But can she succeed in creating such surprising vistas on a large scale, having achieved so much in a small one—and vice versa?" Yes, she can.

The Manchester-born and -bred Michelson and her dancers Parker Lutz, Mike Iveson, Tanya Uhlmann, Greg Zuccolo, Jennifer Howard, and Paige Martin are ensemble players attuned to one another's body shapes, movement styles, and breathing patterns. Their quite different abilities

give the work a fantastic homemade quality, as though a group of friends had set up an impromptu concert in Hanna Schygulla's studio apartment at three in the morning. Talking, whether to each other or to themselves, sometimes in German (the work was conceived in Germany while they were on tour), the dancers appear to be improvising when in fact they are not.

Every detail of Michelson's stage is under the control of her imagination, some parts having less to do with dance than with the strategies of art installation, in which objects and bodies are interchangeable containers of pleasure, memory, even anthropological narratives. Thus each full-length work has its own sometimes impenetrable iconography: A slide of a broadly smiling woman was projected onto a wall of the Kitchen (a personal reference to an influential dance colleague), while at P.S. 122, video monitors set above and behind the audience showed an identical static landscape. At the Kitchen, five petite teenage girls in an alcove downstage right moved back and forth in tight formation, their faces immobile, while in the second section, three of the same, dressed in soft blue chiffon like fairies, mostly stood against a wall, framing the edgy action of the dancers with their childish grace. From beginning to end, a looping, insistent sound track (by Iveson) had the mesmerizing effect of windshield wipers across a wet window at night—glis-tening, soothing, going nowhere.

Michelson's work is on an energetic trajectory. She has had extensive experience performing with some of the best choreographers of the past decade (including Jennifer Monson and Sarah East Johnson) and has made numerous forays on her

own (*Group Experience*, 2002, and *The Experts*, 2002, for Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance project). *Shadowmann* is an ambitious opus that ups the ante for everybody. Its consideration of sexuality emanates from sensual movement rather than a charged agenda, its narratives are closer to the emotions of the body and individual character than to pre-conceived form, and it engages directly with chance encounters in life and onstage. *Shadowmann's* aesthetic stems from a closely observed world of thirty-somethings living in confined quarters in urban enclaves where creativity and dreams battle the banality of ordinary life. It is as if Fassbinder could dance.

—RoseLee Goldberg



Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann*, 2003.
Performance view, P.S. 122, 2003.