

Dance

Bleak House

By Tobi Tobias

Olga Mesa: Solos

The Kitchen

March 22 through 26

Imagine, if you will, a cross between Pina Bausch—danceland's mistress of desolation, surreal activities, and vintage gowns that slip their moorings to reveal nude torsos—and the novelist Jean Rhys, chronicler of compelling women fated for (indeed, lusting after) personal disaster. You're getting close to Olga Mesa, who performed a quartet of extended solos—nuggets, apparently, of a full-evening work—in the appropriately black, bleak performing space at the Kitchen.

Still based in her native Spain, Mesa has made forays into France and New York. These linked solos may well have sprung from the terrible sight so common on our city's pavements—a person deprived of basic resources: food, shelter, money, friends, a purpose, hope. But Mesa, incarnating such a bereft soul, is not trying to incite

us to pity but rather to seduce us into empathy. From an exterior landscape walled in grim brick, she takes us to a barren indoor locale, where the woman she represents sheds her protective overcoat and hood for the tawdry intimacy of a seen-better-days evening dress. And from there she takes us inside the woman's head.

In this private place, dreams, obsessions, desires surge forth in the shape of movement metaphors, play themselves out and recede into shadow. Though the impulses and reveries are never defined literally, they seem utterly plausible, perhaps because they resemble features of our own stream of consciousness. The result is that the woman's fall or exile from civilization and its ordinary comforts appears logical, inevitable. This figure is not one of "them," she is one of "us"—perfectly human. She may have been driven half-mad by her situation, but she has not relinquished her integrity or her imagination.

The movement Mesa uses is rooted in pedestrian action rather than

in any codified dance vocabulary—classical ballet, say, or midcentury modern. A lot of it is stuff you might find yourself doing in the normal course of your existence: walking guardedly down a deserted, ill-lit street; scrambling frantically on the floor; sitting in plaintive meditation, rubbing your cheek, perhaps, on a piece of furniture that has been with you most of your life; reaching again and again toward the thing you covet. Mesa transforms this kind of material into art by divorcing the moves from a familiar, explicit context and by heightening them through her clear, vehement performance, a marvel of sincerity and focus. She is also astute enough to apply the old-fashioned device of formal structure to her extremely fluid concepts, so that whatever happens—and some very odd things do—has the air of being under assured control.

This is not quite a one-woman show. The haunting effect of Mesa's work owes much to its lighting by Cora, a woman who understands that the placement of a light has as much emotional impact as its intensity or color and who is expert at the gradations of twilight, the hour of ominous intimations the French describe as being between dog and wolf. ■