

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

February 2011

## On Blind Faith...

By Christine Hou

There are many ways to experience dance without extracting “meaning” from it. Without having to answer the questions: What am I looking for? What do I want from this? Instead, we take a leap of faith. We surrender. Thus is Sarah Michelson’s *Devotion*, which premiered at the Kitchen on January 13.



Michelson choreographs through a kaleidoscope. Light enters through one end giving view to fractured movements repeating in loose circles. She is searching for the strangeness brought out by infinite and intimate variations—she the creator of beautiful forms.

This epic 105-minute work, which unfolds in three acts on a shallow, horizontal stage, is based on a text written by Richard Maxwell, the artistic director of New York City Players, and read by Michelson as an introduction and conclusion. The story is a contemporary, biblical monologue with a loose narrative reference to the origin of life. The text meanders and is filled with poetic observations, existential questions, and vague references to personal experiences like, “You are innocent when you don’t know what you are. That’s how you feel when you free base.” Rebecca Warner, as the narrator, opens with a rigorous solo, accompanied by Michelson’s voice. Precise, hard, angular positions are repeated in rapid procession. Arms extend outward like vectors in space; her body crouches and then retreats. Arms shield the body in a protective letter “O,” legs buckle into a letter “V.” “Experience is pulled in two halves...you need your space....” Michelson reads. We float in and out of the narrative like a fractured dream space. We feel the choreography being pounded into Warner’s body.

In the second act, Non Griffiths, Mary, dramatically enters stage left. Pete Drungle’s operatic musical score (intercut with Philip Glass’s *Dance IX*) joins her along with the spectacular lighting efforts of Michelson and Zack Tinkelman. Griffiths, age 14, dances like a mechanical doll. She moves quickly and in severe, contorted angles at once alien and angelic. She is

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fascinating, and terrifying, to watch: her disturbingly thin and androgynous frame, her defensive and frightened face. In a particularly eerie movement, her back bends and hips shoot forward as she takes two grossly exaggerated steps—a style horrifyingly reminiscent of Linda Blair’s spider walk in *The Exorcist*. When Jesus, performed by James Tyson, enters and laboriously runs and crawls in circles besides an endlessly spinning Griffiths, the intentional frustration underlying Michelson’s work becomes palpable. She is testing us. It is not a deterrent, though, but an ambitious statement. What did you come here to see? She seems to be asking us. How blind is your faith?

Even more challenging is the final act with Jim Fletcher and Eleanor Hullihan as Adam and Eve. Fletcher hops and runs to the point of near collapse. Hullihan follows soon after, running full force back and forth across the stage, and repeatedly throwing herself against his sweaty, battered body. The sequence is filled with an antagonizing insistence—one long, grueling climax. By the end we, like the dancers, are exhausted. We have watched and absorbed to the point of defeat. As Warner’s extraordinary presence appears once more beneath a spotlight, Michelson’s meditative voice turns back on: “We are the story...” She says. “I am your custodian...I maintain your current surrounding...” We watch in silent response. We are here. We are yours. Hypnotized. Devoted.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/02/dance/on-blind-faith>