

Time Out

New York

Helen Mirren
Getting personal with *Prime Suspect's* swinging detective

Pavement
Sharing a beer with the boys in the band

Jennifer Monson *The Kitchen*, 512 W 19th St at Tenth Ave (255-5793). Subway: C, E to 23rd St; A, C, E to 14th St; L to Eighth Ave. 8pm, \$15. Choreographer Monson presents *Sender*, a dance and music piece for ten performers (four musicians, six dancers) set to a score by Zeena Parkins. The work explores ideas of confinement, resistance, force and enforcement in three sections. The dancers are Eduardo Alegria, Heather Cunningham, DD Dorvillier, Christine Pichini, Daniela Pinto and Monson. See Preview.

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Darci Kistler lights up the New York City B

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THE KITCHEN

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DANCE

Preview

MONSON SEASON

Jennifer Monson's *Sender* storms through prison life



Jennifer Monson is a name that incites instant pleasure in downtown dance circles. It doesn't matter that she isn't an extremely technical dancer. As an improviser, a dancer for choreographers such as Yvonne Meier and Jeremy Nelson, and a choreographer herself, perhaps her finest gift is an uncanny ability to create and showcase movement that pushes physical boundaries as it gracefully sweeps through space.

Her new piece, *Sender*, is different from anything she's choreographed in the past because it isn't entirely abstract. The piece was sparked by Monson's involvement in political activism, specifically in the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal.

In 1981, Abu-Jamal was arrested for killing a police officer in Philadelphia. As a teenager, he helped found a chapter of the Black Panther Party and later became a journalist and radio commentator who supported the black activist group MOVE. Abu-Jamal is currently on death row but insists he is innocent. Several organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the PEN American Center, believe he wasn't given a fair trial.

Monson agrees. "I've always thought, How can I bring together my political life and my creative life?" Monson says. "At the same time, I usually hate works that are political. But this theme is so rich physically; it reflects my own experience, emotionally and personally, of confinement and resistance. My dancing has always had this strong push and fight [against] something."

Sender isn't a literal adaptation of Abu-Jamal's life, but it does deal with

issues that prisoners face—feeling trapped and, for political prisoners, fighting to adhere to their ideology under harsh conditions. The title comes from letters Monson mistakenly received from a man at the Clinton Correctional Facility in New York. They were addressed to Glorious Wright; stamped on the front were the words LEGAL MATERIALS. She sent them back with a note, giving her name, but the letters for Wright kept arriving. Finally, she wrote RETURN TO SENDER on an envelope. No more came.

In the piece, which is set to music by Zeena Parkins, six dancers slam their bodies against the floor or hurl themselves into one another's arms. Four of them form a human chain by linking hands as another dancer crawls across them. There's even a moment of escape when they frantically climb on top of one another as if they're scrambling over a wall. It's ingenious—seemingly exhausting to do, but exhilarating to watch.

Monson creates movement through improvisation; it's a way to draw out the personalities of her dancers. "I love watching people make decisions with each other onstage," she says. "It pulls me in as a viewer in a very intimate way."

Monson grew up in Southern California and started dancing when she was five; her teacher taught creative dance in an A-frame studio. "It was totally idyllic," Monson remembers. "She died of cancer when I was 12. She was a Christian Scientist. I was just devastated. But I feel very fortunate that I found such a strong voice at such a young age."

At the University of California at Santa Barbara, she studied both dance and biology for a year before moving to the East Coast, where she was accepted into the prestigious dance department at Sarah Lawrence. She supports herself today by teaching creative dance to kids at day-care centers and neighborhood schools. Through these classes, she gives students an understanding of how broad dance is.

"I like a class that's balanced for boys and girls," she says. "The boys get to do rough-and-tumble things, and the girls get to do rough-and-tumble things. I try not to make it a prissy dance class; I do a lot of contact so kids learn that they can be strong, they learn how to support each other, and they learn how to use each other's energy physically without fighting or hurting one another. It's kind of feminist: I want to empower young girls to be strong and to understand their own weight and momentum. And sometimes they all really want to be prissy, so I give out the scarves and put on the harp music and let them be ballerinas."

Teaching kids is also a way for her to continue the work her childhood teacher began. "I feel that as that five-year-old, I found this way to express myself that I can't live without," she says. "It was so important. I don't want to seem romantic or anything, but I feel like my body is my vehicle for communicating. I want to help the kids find a voice, too." —Gia Kourlas
Jennifer Monson presents *Sender* at the Kitchen through Sunday 9.

