



Jennifer Monson's SENDER
The Kitchen/February 6-9, 1997
Cold Weather...Cool Crowd
reviews By Kelly Hargraves



Photo by Carolina Kroon

A snowstorm didn't stop a huge crowd from coming to Jennifer Monson's premiere of SENDER at the Kitchen. Long lines and waiting lists tried the patience of some patrons, but those who were admitted felt a sense of being in the right place. Before the lights dimmed, this piece had an aura of being important, and the "in" thing to see. The audience seemed content upon spotting who else was there too.

SENDER begins as composer Zeena Parkins signals her ensemble of percussionists and a guitarist. The loud clang of chains dropping on cymbals, and a bow screeching across styrofoam set up something rough and un-refined. The starkness of the Kitchen's brick walls, and the blue denim-like tie-up pants and t-shirts of the six dancers reinforce this sense. The environment is fitting, since Monson has taken her images for SENDER from prison life. She captures spatial confinement. As the dancers run in a pack or climb over one another, I can see an exercise yard. Through their restrained gestures, I sense small cell-like compartments. As the group crawls up the walls or across each others' backs, I can see escape attempts and fervent energy.

The severe movements lend themselves to strong imagery, but Monson's dancers avoid drama and climax. Drawn from Monson's use of improv structures and games, SENDER remains uncomplicated by much emotion. We do not feel empathetic or sympathetic to their plight, because the piece retains a coolness that keeps it visual rather than visceral. The group interacts in a way similar to studio-work, but without the sense of the unknown, because now the movements are set. One of the brightest spots is Monson's mid-piece solo when each move has an added brilliance. Other solos are also affecting. However, individual personality is dimmed by the distinctive improv vocabulary, which makes me think that even something called improvisation can become standardized.

Jennifer Monson, renowned for her physical intensity and rough edges, comes from a lineage of post-modern improvisers that includes Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and Simone Forti. This is a lineage built on the idea of looseness, non-dramatic performance, and no direct intent to give moves meaning. By now, the style is so established that even if moves don't have meaning, they have become codified and repeatable. With SENDER, Monson is challenging the improv vocabulary to remain raw, within a scenario that does mean something to her. Political and social beliefs are very much a part of her work.

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