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By Deborah Jowitt

Dance



Sarah Michelson: 'Dover Beach'
The Kitchen
June 9 through 13

To the dance hunt! Non Griffiths and Laura Weston in *Dover Beach*

Dark Tides

Sarah Michelson creates her best work to date

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Sarah Michelson's work makes people ask questions ranging from "How did she come up with an idea like that?" to "What does she think she's doing?" No one, however, asks more questions than Michelson herself—in private and in print—about her choices and gut instincts. Her new work is titled after Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," and a taped reading of it is heard during the performance—from its romantic, nostalgic beginning, "The sea is calm tonight, the tide is full," to its decidedly un-postmodern cry from the heart, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another!" In a *Time Out* interview, Michelson labeled the poem ridiculous and "sappy" (if also beautiful).

But what's to apologize for? Why should British-born Michelson not be reading 19th-century English poetry, or dressing Laura Weston and 12-year-old Non Griffiths for their opening duet in cleverly deconstructed fox-hunting attire (by Elena Scelzi)? In addition, the

piece was created during Michelson's residency at Chapter Arts in Cardiff, Wales (where she first spotted Griffiths and a fellow cast member, 11-year-old Latysa Antonio, in a ballet class).

Dover Beach, Michelson's finest work to date, is also the one with the most dancing. As usual, she has remodeled the performing space, collaborating with Parker Lutz. A tall, yellow fretwork fence divides the Kitchen's black box in half and makes an L-turn to intervene between the audience and stage-left action. In the other half of the space, two white "trees" support slowly turning wheels, each decked with spotlights that illuminate only once (ingenious lighting by Michelson and Carrie Wood). A featureless green-neon portrait (perhaps of Michelson) by Charlotte Cullinan hangs on the back wall. Pete Drungle's elegantly variegated music and Max Bogdanov's surround mix create a landscape with ocean waves, birdsong, and occasional submerged voices. Live piano, horn, and percussion augment the recorded score.

Michelson's choreographic structure riffs off duplication and miniaturization. When Weston and little, skinny Griffiths dance side by side—identically clad and both blonde, almost always in perfect synch—their size difference is not only that between a child and a woman, but, in skewed painterly terms, between things

seen far away and up close. Rebecca Warner, who dances behind the fence during their duet, acquires her own tiny double, Sofia Britos, who, like Warner, wears a cleverly cut, black unitard and gold hoop earrings. Some minutes after Antonio appears, clad in a blousy white shirt and cut-off white tights over black stockings (and holds a tilted balance with one leg lifted high for an amazingly long time), Alice Downing performs in a grown-up version of the same outfit. Although costumed unlike anyone else, tall Jmy Leary often dances in unison with Warner in the caged half of the stage.

A man with a horse's head appears three times.

The finely designed movements that flit from one performer to another are extremely rigorous. You watch Weston and Griffiths going at it nonstop for a stretch and marvel at their endurance. There's very little softness, except in some of the extravagant poses that the wonderful Warner sinks into. Fierce and dauntless, the females in this tribe execute every lunge, bend, crouch, high kick, stiff jump, and angular gesture as if each were a separate, demanding task. At the end, Warner stands for ages, her back to us, braced against the rear wall in a position she and others have often struck, grasping one leg and holding it high to the side. On the other half of the stage, the wheels spin faster, their lights blazing, and, behind Warner, a late arrival, Adele Nickel, falls to the floor; Warner never budges.

Enigmas abound in the contrasts between ebb and flow, dark and light, large and small, caged and free. A man with a horse's head (Oren Barnoy) appears three times; near the end, he slowly turns Warner like a ballet cavalier and then drags her backward into darkness. Most provocative is a duet between Greg Zuccolo, who appears halfway through *Dover Beach* looking like *Jane Eyre's* Mr. Rochester in deshabelle, and 13-year-old Allegra Herman, who has intermittently entered to watch. Sometimes Zuccolo treats this small, grave girl in black as he would an adult partner, sometimes as her ballet teacher (stretching her leg high, he looks toward us, as if gauging her progress in a mirror). But when he bends over, she pats his neck (horse imagery again), and when he disappears behind a free-standing black-paneled wall, she reaches out and pulls him onstage again. Finally, he carries her off. It's more than a little creepy, yet Herman's blend of adeptness and inexperience is also touching. Watching her and the other immature performers is like watching dancing in a pure, raw, unaffected form.

Dover Beach hovers at the edges of my mind—evading analysis, luminous.

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