

MAGAZINE DANCE®

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Sarah Michelson



There's a moment, far into Sarah Michelson's *Dover Beach*, when the resounding, brutally obsessive chime of Peter Drungle's cinematic music and the motor wheeze (issuing, I assume, from certain structures in Parker Lutz's set), suddenly drop away down something dark, steep, and unforgiving. You hear but the

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whisper of a hum, like a more distant motor. You think you're about to be sprung from the bell jar in which Michelson has trapped you and the eerily mechanistic dancing you've been watching and the stifling, cramped airlessness of that big black hole known as The Kitchen. But the inexplicable image continues in silence for a long stretch, and gets bigger, stranger and, oddly enough, better until the music returns with renewed, chest-crushing intensity.

Of course, because this is Sarah Michelson, we're talking about a heedless, eccentric vision that wavers between asserting itself and undermining itself with its over-the-topness. How to read a work that dares employ child dancers as deadly serious, mini-me performers whose unexpected mastery of Michelson's arid, puppet-like movement makes your skin crawl? Or a work in which Matthew Arnold's romantic, pessimistic verse suddenly rings out, with its evocation of "confused alarms of struggle and flight" and the clash of "ignorant armies"? Or the sight of a dancer costumed in a horse's head that throws unfortunate thoughts of *Equus* and Freud into the mix?

Some dancers are screened off within a holding pen. Constructed from a lacy, repetitive pattern, this enclosure is decorative but rigid. You can see through it but only so much. To the left, other dancers, dressed to evoke uppercrust Brits off to a fox hunt, dance a kind of abstract, barefoot ballet; they share space with two motorized objects resembling enormous standing fans. The circular, rotating part of each structure anchors several theatrical lights, which appear to have three settings—off, white, and amber. They made me also think of torpedos or oversized bullets on an endless assembly line.

Thirteen-year-old Allegra Herman proved to be the most arresting of several youngsters who appear amid the adults in *Dover Beach*. Partnered by Michelson-regular Greg Zuccolo, she rules the quiet section with accuracy and razor-sharp dramatic focus. Michelson may not be interested in—or, perhaps, capable of—giving viewers a firm foundation to stand upon: a point of view, a reliable sense of meaning, some "certitude" upon this "darkling plain." But the unforgettable Herman, at least, appears to know who she is and why she's dancing.