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Matters of Faith, Prayer And Physical Exertion

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO JAN. 14, 2011

So much art slides out of your mind as soon as you see it: it demands nothing, it gives nothing. Such empty performances engender a particular type of desperation, especially for those who see a lot of shows. At a certain point, trapped in a theater, all you can hear are the seconds ticking away.

And then there is art like Sarah Michelson's. Her new dance, "Devotion," had its premiere on Thursday night at the Kitchen; it's a perfect title for Ms. Michelson, who demands that audiences give themselves over to her unrelenting vision, full stop. And why wouldn't we? The work gives right back.

As for what Ms. Michelson requires of her collaborators and cast — well, let's just say that "Gatz," the eight-hour Elevator Repair Service tour de force, seems gentle by comparison. Jim Fletcher played the title character in that production; he plays Adam in "Devotion," and the Bessies committee, which recognizes New York dance artists, should consider giving him an award for sheer, gritted-teeth endurance (assuming he makes it through this two-week run).

By the way, that's Adam, as in Adam and Eve (Eleanor Hullihan). They are joined by Mary (Non Griffiths), Jesus (James Tyson), the Narrator (Rebecca Warner) and the Spirit of Religion (Nicole Mannarino), with four prophets aiding the action. The often soaring, never coy script opens: "Before the dawn on the earth's ninth day, the crisp green gold of leaves and wood, vital and pleasures infinite, and

what is sleep, or rest. What is day? What is night? What is sky? What is sea? All are in a stage of discovery and wonder.” “Devotion” isn’t fooling around with faith.

Those words were written by Richard Maxwell, the artistic director of the New York City Players, and the cast of “Devotion” includes actors — Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Tyson — associated with that company. But it is Ms. Michelson, otherwise not in the piece, who reads the entire text, a big chunk at the beginning and an epilogue at the end of this 100-minute work. Make no mistake: “Devotion” is all dance.

And what gloriously severe dancing it is, pushing performers almost beyond themselves. Ms. Michelson, who always manages to transform theaters in magical ways, has used the length of the Kitchen, setting the audience members in low, shallow risers so that they are pressed close to the action, able to see just what these punishing stretches of movement cost the performers, and how the effort exalts them.

Elements of ballet and of yoga are clear in Ms. Michelson’s choreography, which drives the dancers through exhaustingly repetitive phrases, marked by long balances in relevé, plunging lunges, rigidly held arms and precisely calibrated jumps. Ms. Warner is heroically serene as the Narrator, expanding to fill the big, black space while Ms. Michelson reads in a calm, fluid voice. The 14-year-old, terribly thin Ms. Griffiths, her blond hair pulled into a tightly sectioned ponytail, is an exquisite combination of frailty and ferociousness.

Ms. Griffiths was a standout in Ms. Michelson’s previous work, the 2009 “Dover Beach,” where she seemed more the child. Here she is poised between states, seeming to be both protector to her adult son and weighed down by a burden she barely understands — and perhaps doesn’t need to understand. She is beyond it.

“How can one woman, me, this woman, be given a burden like this?” Mr. Maxwell’s script reads. “Why this woman? I can’t take it.” Yet you know that Ms. Griffiths will somehow fight her way through this material, just as you fear Mr. Fletcher might topple in the Adam and Eve section. (Ms. Hullihan seems almost to will both of them through their muscular duet, in which she repeatedly hurls herself into his arms.) And both of these feelings are exhilarating — and painful.

“In the Upper Room,” Twyla Tharp’s grueling marathon of a ballet, elicits similar responses. In “Devotion” Ms. Michelson makes explicit reference to that implicitly religious dance: Pete Drungle’s thrumming, ominous music is roughly spliced with Philip Glass’s “Dance IX,” which Ms. Tharp’s ballet used. Specific steps are quoted, and the largely red, white and black costumes (by James Kidd, Shaina Mote and Ms. Michelson) also echo “In the Upper Room,” with their athletic warm-up pants and skirts, sneakers and racer-back leotards.

Ms. Michelson is paying tribute. But she is also continuing the personal creation mythology that she has developed during her career. Mr. Maxwell’s text conflates elemental Christian narratives with what seems to be his own history, and the walls of the Kitchen are adorned with T M Davy’s large oil portraits of Ms. Michelson, in a red dress, and the bare-chested Mr. Maxwell. Both stark and opulent, they, too, suggest religious themes. (The marvelous set is completed by imposing clusters of hanging lights, designed by Zack Tinkelman and Ms. Michelson, that sweep the theater with fast-moving swaths of brilliance.)

Ms. Michelson’s devotion to her art seems unwavering, at times extreme. Taking in this “Devotion” exhausts; it isn’t always pleasant. Yet how held you feel in this room, by these artists.

“I am your custodian,” Ms. Michelson reads at the end. And, a bit later, Mr. Maxwell’s final three words: “Undivided. Voluminous. Yours.”

“Devotion” runs through Jan. 22 at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, thekitchen.org.

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