

# Dance

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**NEW HEIGHTS**  
James Tyson gets to the point in *Devotion*.

## Acts of Devotion

The choreographer Sarah Michelson isn't talking about princess dreams. By **Gia Kourlas**

The year isn't starting off terribly: Sarah Michelson has made a new dance. In *Devotion*, two actors—Jim Fletcher and James Tyson—join dancers Rebecca Warner, Non Griffiths, Nicole Mannarino and Eleanor Hulihan. Inspired by a piece of writing by playwright and New York City Players director Richard Maxwell, the production—beginning Thursday 13—dives into the archetypes of dance and marks Michelson's return to the Kitchen. In December, after a full day of rehearsal in Brooklyn, she spoke about her new work.

### What are the ideas behind *Devotion*?

Richard Maxwell approached me about making a piece of his writing into a narrative ballet. And I right away said yes, most predominantly because I felt like I would be so pissed if some other choreographer [did it]. I am deeply akin to his work and to the astringency and rigor about the form—the naturalism and colloquialism and formalism that's in his approach to theater. I thought that it was going to be a New York City Players show at the Kitchen, of which I would be the choreographer, but it became clearer and clearer that it was going to be a dance show made by me, based on his writing.

### Can you talk about the story?

I can say that it's archetypal heroes and it's biblical. So, biblical, archetypal, hero, heroine.

### Is Jim Fletcher dancing?

[Nods head] It's a dance, baby. There are two straight men in my show:

They're both called James, they both aren't dancers, and they both are dancing. Weird, right?

### You started working with kids in *Shadowmann*, but there are no children in *Devotion*. Non Griffiths, who is now 14, isn't a child in this world.

I'm not thinking of her as a child in this. I think of her in the way I think of Rebecca [Warner]. We have been on a journey and the journey isn't over. She was a child in [2009's] *Dover Beach*, and she's no longer a child.

### What did you learn about your movement from working with young girls? I always felt that it was a way for you to see something more clearly.

The only way to answer this question, honestly, is so disgusting. I think it's really Therapy 101. It's about me—like, I wish I had known me or something. Okay: There are so many girls who want to be dancers. And the love of dance is something I really share with them. Like, I want to be a dancer too, even still. [Laughs] And that love of dance that they have, that desire to dance, where dance is their dream, I think is central to the work that I make. So when they're there, that full, open hope is present in the room. Rebecca has that too. It's not so much about their bodies, but it's about the dream. I'm not talking about princess dreams. Non works hard. There's a potential of

freedom that dance can bring you, and I'm sure it gets talked about a lot on *So You Think You Can Dance*, but I think that idea, that feeling, is real. "It takes work" and "fame starts here" and all that archetypal crap is based on something real. I feel it in those girls. I

tell Non about Merce Cunningham and Lucinda Childs. I talk to her about dance history.

### Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham recently died—are you reacting to that here?

I'm totally reacting to that. When Merce Cunningham died, I called up Glen [Rumsey, former Cunningham

dancer] and I was just sobbing. I was like, "It's so crazy that I'm sobbing," and he said, "It's not crazy at all." I felt like suddenly all of us fuffing around, acting like kids with parents, are on the front line. I don't know how to talk about the landscape of what's gone before, like Merce or Pina Bausch or Trisha Brown or Mark Morris, or to talk about where the more itchy-bitsy choreographers like me line up in relationship to them. I don't have a desire for that [sort of role], but I did feel protected by it. The leader's gone, and I didn't even know he was the leader. I didn't love all his work. I'm not a down-on-the-ground fan; I've seen things that I

thought were just a piece of shit; he just gets to do that. But there are also masterpieces. I do think that *Biped* is a very, very incredible fucking dance. His dances stand the test of time in that way that is kind of brutal where, yeah, you prefer some company members to others, but in the end, at least while he was alive, the work shows up with whoever's dancing it. I have not ever been capable of that. I don't know if I ever will be.

### In terms of *Devotion*, what are you trying to discover or see?

I feel like the dance is going to fail. I feel like that's okay, but I'm lying. I'm going to hate when it does. I know I'm putting very unsuccessful elements on the stage, so I'm committed to that. And the truth of the matter is everyone is injured—no one's body feels good. They can't do it. I didn't intend this when I was making it, but I think there's a slight part [of the piece] that is about dance. You have to be devoted to do it, and it's difficult. So I'm dealing with that difficulty and rigorousness and duration and the lack of reward.

There's a way in which I am undoing the possibility to see what's happening, even though the dancers are impaling themselves on it. It's martyrdom, which was Richard's first idea. We're martyring ourselves to the thing I'm doing. There's no payoff.

**GIVE IN TO DEVOTION!**

To read a complete interview with Sarah Michelson, visit [timeoutnewyork.com/dance](http://timeoutnewyork.com/dance).

Sarah Michelson presents *Devotion* at the Kitchen Thu 13–Sat 15 and Wed 19–Jan 22.

Dance