

Broad Street Review

Jumatatu Poe's "Private Places" at Live Arts Festival

What we can learn from airline stewardesses

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October 01, 2012 in *Dance*



Poe: Inspired by stewardesses and drum majorettes.

Airline stewardesses and service industries aren't the usual sources of inspiration for the performing arts. Nor is an underground dance form that originated among drill teams and majorettes of Southern, historically black universities and found a Northern home amidst black male gay clubs.

But Jumatatu Poe, a talented and adventurous 30-year-old choreographer, dipped into these disparate worlds to create a new and provocative, if uneven, work, *Private Places*, in the recently concluded Live Arts Festival.

Poe appears to have been fascinated both by the gestures and body movements of orchestrated service workers like stewardesses, whom we carefully eye from our assigned seats in airplanes. Poe was also attuned to the stewardesses' social psychology of sublimating their feelings while attending to their passengers' needs.

J-Sette, the dance form that Poe also tapped from its Southern and gay club venues, contains its own set of stylized gestures and expressions, but with an in-your-face flamboyant sexuality. (J-Sette hit the mainstream

when Beyoncé adopted it for her video, "Single Ladies.")

Otherworldly eyebrows

The choreographer set his stage within a narrow rectangular space, with the audience seated in moveable chairs both on the sides and in rows in the middle, leaving narrow pathways and limited space for the eight dancers to perform in. Most of the action consisted of commands and sharp, gestural responses from a corps of dancers altered by the multilayered and fragmented costumes of Katie Coble, as well as by makeup whose brightened eyes and flattened eyebrow arches lent the dancers an other-worldly aspect.

Although the repetition wore thin, the work achieved an intriguing dynamic between control and disintegration: The dominating elements of authoritarian control and direction embodied the piece, manifested in the stylized movement and gestures of the torso and arms, and including in one section the encasing of a dancer (Gregory Holt) within a suitcase— where, quite amazingly, he continued his performance in muffled restraint.

Throughout the performance, a tyrannical digitalized metronome provided both the soundscape and the choreographic commands to the dancers, controlling or initiating their movements.

Tearing off clothes

These dehumanizing aspects alternated with elements of disintegration and dissolution, from the erratic emotional and physical eruptions of the dancers (most notably in Zornitsa Stoyanova's altered states solo) to the progressive tearing off of costume apparatus and clothes.

The message of all this, apparently, was that dehumanizing, societal and capitalist controls contain the seeds of their own disintegration.

In a wonderful layering upon these themes, we also see Poe's introduction of J-Sette dance with his dancers snapping brilliantly in synchronized waves— like hip-hop popping spreading in continuous currents across an ensemble.

In contrast, Poe's earlier, sensuously beautiful trio (with Shannon Murphy and Samantha Speis) had been a cool distillation of the sharply executed, highly extroverted and sexualized movements of J-Sette. (I also saw this trio in the eye-opening Festival event, *We Just Gon' Buck*, at the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia, amidst club versions of J-Sette and Voguing).

Glacial faces

In their J-Sette ensemble, Poe's company shows that exacting direction need not be a dehumanizing vehicle but rather can create a more joyous, exuberant form of expression. Perhaps the dancers, who also included Leanne Grieger, Gabrielle Revlock and Michelle Tantoco, could have broken from their facial glacialness during

this dance. Or not.

Private Places might have lost its compass in its ambiguous final sections, where the dancers stripped into total nudity in close proximity to the audience. Two dancers were then separately showered with a pinkish red liquid dripping upon them— possibly representing blood, or an embalming fluid, or a cleansing solution, or the liquid for some holy benediction.

Then they were wrapped with clear plastic sheeting, leaving those in the audience to find their own resolution or exit from this performance. Like the dancers, I felt buffeted and dazed, knowing only that this work wasn't going to deliver any easy answers.



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