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Dance Review: Electric Haiku, Cathy Weis

Saturday, October 21, 2007

VSA North Fourth Art Center culminated its "Out of the Ordinary Festival" Friday with an intriguing multimedia performance titled "Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard," created by Cathy Weis. A Southerner transplanted to New York City, Weis uses technology with the human body to explore new ways of seeing and hearing.

Weis a dancer most of her life, explained the effect of her multiple sclerosis on her choreography. She had to adjust the scope and content of her work. Seeing, hearing and moving in new ways also revealed the biological process of tangled synapses connecting or disconnecting from the body's musculature. There was no sentimentality of self pity here, just a revelation of the vast range within the art of dance. Her dance, music, and technical collaborators have responded to her designs with magical results. That were funny and inspiring.

The stage set included cables, multiple cameras, an on stage sound platform for Steve Hamilton to create the live sound, and a central screen that resembled a puppet theatre. The screen became a fun house mirror of all that occurred on stage, duplicating it into what appeared to be ever deeper layers of space. Emily Stork's lighting design brought all this together in a fun, humorous, and exciting visual experience.

The program's first piece, "A Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad," danced by Scott Heron and Elizabeth Ward, introduced the element of escape. into a world of imagination. The dancers' movement was repeated, reversed, and multiplied by images on the central, "mental" screen. Ward, as the character Helen, escaped by removing herself into an imagined 1930s roadhouse on Route 66. Her real lover was displaced by an imaginary one. The image of Helen's face is devoured by flames on screen, and Heron, scoured from her brain, disappears as well.

The "Electric Haiku" is a dance in six parts. It began with a brief introduction by Weis about the physical location and impetus of dance movement. She noted that Duncan, De Mille, and Graham described their ideas about this, but for Weis it is the feet, responding to a surface as sounds and sights of the real and imagined world stimulate action.

When the curtains parted Heron appeared at center stage heavily cloaked from head to toe. He moved with tiny gliding steps, like a robot, then removed his cloak. Highly amplified sound accented each button popping, and a sound of fluttering birds announced the final opening of the cloak. Sight and sound, exaggerated artistically, created the image of a circus act. Heron jumped onto a low platform, balancing as though on a wire in mid air. When a camera was turned on at foot level, the physical actions and reactions of the feet on the platform were seen on the large screen. When a miniature airplane was passed in front of the camera it was seen as attacking the dancer on screen as he jumped in fear.

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The next section revealed a light box, or cradle on a stretcher, covered by fluffed, filmy material that glowed like some spooky, perhaps sacred object. Carried by two attendants, Weis and Jennifer Miller who glided across the floor with those tiny robotic steps, the light object was stroked, attacked with striking arms, and finally tilted to establish a diagonal light path on stage. The dancers began strongly shaped movement along the path, both toward and away from the light source, exploring angular sculptures of arms and torsos. The live sounds accented each ritual gesture.

Then there was the talking-head in a portable T.V. that passed through the audience and flew around the stage – wonderful inventive stuff! The final section, to "The Streets of Laredo," brought dancers and sound technician onstage in a country music band. Weis sang with the puppet body of a cowboy and its televised head on her lap.