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Haiku set to dance — successfully

By Tresca Weinstein

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TROY – Silly and sublime, dappled with shadows and light, like water in wind. That’s a little haiku describing choreographer Cathy Weis’ adorable and profound work “Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard.” Weis and dancers Scott Heron and Jennifer Monson performed excerpts from the 2005 series, along with two new pieces by Weis, on Friday evening at EMPAC. The program will be repeated tonight (Saturday) at 8 p.m.

Choreographers in general and particularly the “downtown” variety — and the New York City-based Weis is so downtown she’s in danger of getting the bends — strive to unearth new ways of seeing and to let their audiences in on their discoveries. For a number of years, technology, particularly prerecorded and live video imagery, has figured largely in this quest, as it does in Weis’ work.

Surprisingly and delightfully, she succeeds. For example, one “haiku” gives us a giant, black-and-white, slow motion video of Heron’s foot, making zillions of tiny shifts in alignment as he balances on one leg. In another haiku, he turns around and around on stage, swinging a camera affixed to a board in circles around him. What the camera sees is projected on the screen behind him: a wildly whirling view of his face and the stage, while the board itself appears completely stationary.

These mysterious images and juxtapositions are tethered to earth by humor;; beautifully focused and self-contained movement;; text;; and clever sound effects, mixed live by sound designer Steve Hamilton. At one point, Weis’ recorded voice tells a story about her multiple sclerosis, likening the two sides of her body (the right one is most affected by the MS) to Greg Louganis dancing with Margaret Thatcher.

Simultaneously, Weis is restored to multi-limbed symmetry as two overlapping images of her dancing figure are projected onto the white screen behind her. By contrast, the two new works feel tentative and self-conscious, though they also contain moments both striking and giggle-worthy. Embodying a fish, Heron prances in puffs of tulle and glittery gold through “The Sea Around Us or A Muse, Me Pisces”;; eventually he gets snagged on a giant hook. Much more captivating are the prerecorded video images of Weis swimming and dancing underwater.

“The Bottom Fell Out of the Tub” is more original in theory, but not terribly engaging on stage. As Monson — a powerful, deliberate dancer — pushes and pulls a rolling screen across the floor, her image and the screen itself are taped from different angles and projected onto a second screen. The multiple, Escher-like layers are initially intriguing, but the exercise ultimately comes off as repetitive and cerebral, lacking the warmth and winks that make Weis’ “haikus” so utterly enchanting.

Tresca Weinstein is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

CATHY WEIS

Where: EMPAC, 110 Eighth St., Troy

When: 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 6

Program: “The Sea Around Us or A Muse, Me Pisces,” “The Bottom Fell Out of the Tub,” “Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard”

The crowd: About 70 students and other indie-film, alt-rock types