**Why Does One Improviser Rock and Another Falls Flat?**

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It’s hard to tell, but I think it has something to do with the mind-body connection. If the dancer is deeply concentrated and her body has its own imagination, you are taken on a fascinating ride. If the dancer is doing simply what she already knows and not going beyond, you just have to wait it out. Last Friday, in a program that Movement Research’s Fall Festival co-presented with the Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church, Katie Duck embodied the first type and Patricia Nicholson the second. Completing the program was Lower Left Performance Collective, headed by Nina Martin,
    Katie Duck is the Zorba the Greek of improvisation: earthy, feeling every mode of sensuality, preposterous, irresistible, polymorphously perverse. Watching her dance is like watching her body think. She is responsive to every situation and obviously enjoys getting into trouble. This piece with K.J. Holmes and Justin Morrison is sort of a round robin of quasi-sexual encounters, punctuated by nicely ridiculous utterances. There was an acknowledgement on the one hand of how inherently absurd performing is, and on the other how inherently physical-bordering-on-the-sexual it can be. It’s about bodies moving, bodies being attracted to each other. True to her mercurial (yet also somehow grounded) self, she performed a haphazardly erotic duet with Morrison, but later confessed her love (in mock Shakespearean tones) to Holmes. In the best improvisation you can’t tell what’s planned and what isn’t, but it all seems to flow, and this was true here. At the end, Duck is out in dark space alone, while Holmes and Morrison are up on the altar inching toward each other. The lights fade as they get very very close to kissing.
    Patricia Nicholson seemed to have her solo fully planned. From the start, I felt she wasn’t going to get into any interesting trouble. Why did I feel this? Right away I could see she’s a good mover, particularly her fluid upper body. But something about her seemed narcissistic, as though she limited herself to only what she looked good in. She wore her hair down, and often stopped to rearrange it. Why, I wondered, didn’t she fix her hair to not have to worry about it while dancing? That action completely broke the concentration. Or maybe there was no concentration to begin with. Her collaborators, William Parker on bass and Bill Mazza doing live doodles projected onto the altar, were more engaged and engaging.
    Nina Martin developed her unique way of moving groups in space in the 1980s. The piece on Friday, called *This Space Intentionally Left Blank,* began with five dancers wearing vaguely Victorian outfits, in formal tableaux, but evolved into something quite different, something obsessive. Martin would launch into a tilted turning hop, then stop, and hold still like she was done. Then, when others either ignored her or joined in, she would re-launch, and somehow it was funny each time. Because you didn’t know what she would do next. Because *she* didn’t know what she would do next. That alertness, that willingness to be stubborn, kept everyone awake. She had an ally in Andrew Wass, who almost played a character, furtively looking around but willing to start his own trouble. By the end, when Martin plus two other women were trying to lift him, he decided not to budge, as though he were glued to the floor. To see these conflicting intentions in their bodies was both funny and poignant.