

DANCE REVIEW

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Tension, passion captured in 'Uprising'

By Janine Parker, Globe Correspondent | July 11, 2008

BECKET - At the beginning of choreographer Hofesh Shechter's "Uprising," the cast's seven men rush forward, line up, and strike a balance on one leg, posed in the familiar ballet position of *passé*. It's amusing, but the longer they hold the position, sly: It's as if Shechter is saying to us, "Yes, what you're about to see is indeed dance, with trained dancers, but beyond that, let go of your expectations." Good advice, but unnecessary - Shechter had us at hello.

Jacob's Pillow is hosting the US debut of Shechter's eponymous London-based company, which was just formed in January. This Israeli-born wunderkind - he's 33, and has only been making dances for a handful of years - has absorbed the sophisticated, cool-yet-passionate movement style of many of the newer breed of overseas choreographers. Shechter's dancers slink along the stage, meeting it with the caressing fluidity of lovers. The vocabulary is so eclectic that while there are recognizable motifs, rarely is a phrase seemingly used more than twice.

In another's hands, this grab bag of steps could be chaos. It's the first clue that Shechter has the rare gift of natural craftsmanship. His movement is - and not in the new-agey sense - completely organic. One moment rushes beautifully, honestly, into the next. We don't see the work behind the workmanship. Stage patterns emerge out of what seems to be a confused hubbub; gorgeous, crisp dance phrases spring from pedestrianism. The movements ripple across the proscenium; an observer feels it in the gut.

"Uprising," and the other dance on the program, "In your rooms," have deeply societal contexts. "Uprising" was inspired in part by the 2006 youth protests and riots in the suburbs of Paris, while "In your rooms" explores the defensiveness and artifice that we often use to protect ourselves in dealings with others. Shechter limns vulnerabilities aching, without sappiness. This is most appreciated in the all-male "Uprising," which avoids stereotypes while vividly capturing the tensions men face today as they struggle to balance the internal warrior with the evolved gentle man within.

The men do spar in "Uprising," but the aggression never lasts long - an attack melts into an embrace, and there's more camaraderie than conflict. And the one all-out group brawl is deftly funny: One at a time, a man slaps the upper arm of the man next to him, he-man like; this goes around the circle, each slap subtly growing in heat. When the first man is reached he kicks it up a notch, whacks the next guy in the face, and the floodgates are opened.

Indeed, it's a mixture of humor and humility that keeps Shechter's works from lapsing into morality plays. Certainly "In your rooms," a small masterpiece, conjures that dark place of the individual's ultimate aloneness, but there is always a glimmer of light. Dancers often move with heads bowed, chests concave, exuding anxiety and hurt, but they keep taking chances, they keep seeking human warmth and comfort.

Lee Curran's evocative lighting design and the live percussion-and-strings accompaniment (composed by Shechter and Nell Catchpole) help create a universe in which all the parts are integral, and wildly compelling. ■

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