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### Dance review: Hofesh Shechter Company at Royce Hall

October 18, 2009 | 4:08 pm



For a captivating lesson in deconstruction, graduate students would do well to close their jargon-laden post-structural primers and check out the work of Israeli choreographer Hofesh Shechter next time he's in town. His U.K.-based company, making its West Coast debut courtesy of [UCLA Live](#), presented "Uprising/In your rooms" at Royce Hall on Friday and Saturday nights, and the double bill offered a mesmerizing illustration of the way seemingly contradictory forces can mirror each other's

desires and definitions.

“Uprising,” inspired in part by the violent 2006 Paris protests of disaffected youths, consists of seven male dancers from different backgrounds. Dressed like a Gap ad, they emerge from stage shadows as a militantly industrial soundscape, which Shechter (as his custom) composed, swells.

Each dancer, filing in an introductory line formation, raises a leg to his knee. But this balletic pose is only an assurance of formal finesse — what follows could hardly be less daintily traditional. Shechter is an alumnus of Batsheva Dance Company, and his work surges with a similar kind of mutinous corporeal freedom. His dancers may not all be at the same bold level, but they best distinguish themselves with a technical prowess that’s smooth yet never showy.

Urban unrest provides the context for Shechter’s meditation. A group that becomes a gang breaks off into individuals, who go it alone at their own peril. Protection and menace, friendship and enmity, belonging and estrangement -- these antitheses shape the movement patterns, which are too stylishly discursive to fall into any clunky literalism.

At times, the dancers seem to be on a makeshift civilian battlefield; at others, they appear to be at a dank after-hours club, where the propulsive unmelodic music is ideally suited to the high of certain drugs. There’s a simian prowling in which groups of twos and threes walk on hands and legs while isolated figures anxiously scurry by. The threat of deadly confrontation, for victims and perpetrators alike, is omnipresent. When stillness comes, it suggests casualties, the truth of the body’s vulnerability and a cold peace.

But there’s also the pleasure of brotherhood on display, the joy of collective strutting, the celebration of limbs leaping in unison and the cockiness of an arm being elevated with a seductive difference. The mood occasionally invokes “West Side Story” but with a hip-hop vibe that’s rawer and more guttural.

Lee Curran’s lighting illuminates the darkness in discrete shafts. Not everything can be seen. Fog floats in the background, intensifying the furtiveness. The connection between sexuality and aggression surfaces— survival on the street brings male bodies into a proximity that’s as tender as it terrifying. The dancers take turns dominating and being dominated. Masculinity’s crimes and consolations form a fluid circuit.

A final, pointedly ironic tableau culminates in the hoisting of a tiny red revolutionary flag. The gap between this angry scattershot flare-up and the epic battles from commemorative history yawns wide. Shechter exposes the beauty of these combustible young men as well as their sad marginality.

“In your rooms” sets in motion a larger field of figures. The dancers are men and women, so naturally the subject is intimacy — more specifically the unreconcilable tension between solitude and togetherness. A restless frustration and unlocatable ache seem to animate their turbulent search for communion. Relief is fleeting, and equilibrium, whatever that mythic state may be, clearly doesn’t imply stasis.

Voiceovers are overlaid in which Shechter goofily speculates on such things as order and chaos in the cosmos and in art. Are they reflections of the same phenomenon, variations on an existential theme? Can they be enfolded in the conundrum of love?

The choreography of the piece takes its inspiration from these quandaries. Torsos writhe, arms plead, heads bow, whole bodies convulse in the presence of an unanswerable mystery. Shared rituals of repetitive steps get adopted as private mantras.

Shechter's score, performed live by a small orchestra, layers haunting strings (cello, viola and double bass) to a percussive foundation. The effect tinges the relentlessness of inner struggle with a quality of pity. The musical direction of Nell Catchpole (who collaborated with Shechter on this musical composition) is as assured as Curran's lighting, which engages the dancers in a unwinnable game of hide-and-seek.

While "Uprising" is potently male, "In your rooms" distinguishes itself by its female presences. If the theatrical impact of this latter work is less startling, it probably has to do with the familiarity of its motif. Yet Shechter finds just as much drive in the dialectical flux of a world of dependent opposites.

-- Charles McNulty

*Photo: Hofesh Shechter Company performing "Uprising." Credit: Ben Rudick*

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