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Performing Arts: Dance

JANIS BRENNER & DANCERS

April 11, 2011

Red and gold lights warm the alcove of the altar at St. Marks Church. Janis Brenner stands center in indigo robes gesturing - a movement-prayer of sorts, that comes to an end as she bends, her right knee and elbow meeting.

So begins 5 Decades II at Danspace Project, the sequel to 5 Decades (2009), a retrospective look at dance, highlighting the work of her former mentor's Mary Wigman and Murray Louis. The program rewinds time, opening with Wigman's Seraphic Song (1929) and Pastorale (1929) as well as a duet from Louis' Cleopatra (1976).

The second half of the evening presents choreographer, dancer and artistic director, Brenner's work: duet from Pieces of Trust (1987 and 1989), a revival of Janis Brenner & Dancers well-known repertoire, heartSTRINGS (1998), and the world premiere of The Mind-Stuff Variation.

Dancers Sumaya Jackson and Christopher Ralph shine in their duet from Pieces of Trust. Ralph's back muscles ripple, stopping only when his hands spring back and press against his neck and lower back. As Jackson re-enters the space Ralph has stirred up, she brings an intense serenity, her body locked in the spotlight, her weight shifting from side to side, and arms criss-crossing up and down her body.

The company's style is evident in heartSTRINGS with the dancers constantly swirling in and out of one another; the movement has the quality of a gasp, stopping abruptly to create snapshot images intermittently.

The finale performance and world premiere of The Mind Stuff Variation is a lovely departure from the world created of historical, known choreography to instead, a more experimental, fresh look at the choreographic process. Based on psychologist William James' 1890's Mind-Stuff Theory, the piece explores the connection between the body in the mind as the dancers playfully speak and move simultaneously, exploring literal and figurative interpretation of words as well as the challenge to bridge thoughts and instructions into physical movement. It's a collage of "What if?" challenges, comedy, beauty and awkwardness, not to mention the eclectic music collaboration with Jerome Begin.
EYE ON THE ARTS, NY -- Jennifer Thompson