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My Thoughts on "Solo for Janis" by Richard Siegal

"Solo for Janis" was an incredibly humorous piece with a surprisingly tragic ending. Janis Brenner's own vocal accompaniment to the piece, as opposed to a musical score, added dramatic layers to the performance as a whole, as did the costuming. The piece was emotionally uplifting and draining at the same time, giving me an intense, intimate emotional experience.

I was nervous at the beginning of the piece. Ms. Brenner jaggedly strutted onto the stage in a crumpled pink nightgown. Initially, I was not sure if I was supposed to laugh, but then she began reciting what sounded like a children's nursery rhyme and dancing to the rhythm of her words, I felt a little more settled and allowed myself to chuckle. From that point on, I wanted to laugh uproariously because, to me, Ms. Brenner had transformed herself into a little girl dancing around in the living room; a little girl reminiscent of myself at a young age. I could feel her need for attention and her delight in rhymes because it made me remember dancing around my living room (or the grocery store, or anywhere I happened to be) yelling watch me, watch me. The piece struck a nerve with me, but it was a pleasant nerve, not a painful one.

The piece itself was incredibly funny, even without recognizing a picture of myself onstage. It was delightfully humorous, and somehow comforting, to watch a grown woman pretend to be a little girl pretending. At first I felt she was just playing alone, pretending for its own sake, but as the piece progressed, I began to feel that she was not just playing because it was fun, but was crying out for attention from someone. The attention getting scheme was exemplified by the pause in movement when Ms. Brenner lunged, extended one arm, placed the other arm on her breast, and proceeded to hold a long, loud note, for what seemed like eternity. The extended arm appeared to be reaching out to someone, begging them to look, to come closer. At this point the piece still felt humorous, after all, she was grabbing her bosom, but the mood started to shift, and by the tragic end, I felt this was where the transition had taken place. By the end, the piece had taken a distressing turn. Frankly, I was more than a little traumatized by the ending. The piece had been funny, at times uplifting, and it was devastating to watch the demise of that little girl. She had been trying so hard, only to be crushed. My initial reaction was a vision of child abuse. I felt the piece portrayed a little girl, lonely from lack of attention by uncaring parents. She was trying everything she could possibly think of to gain their attention, but to no avail. Then it seemed that everything stopped and she crumpled. It was as if she had finally gotten the attention she wanted, but in a violently negative way. Images of a little girl being shot or beaten down were running through my head. I was overwhelmed and disturbed by the ending, it took me by surprise.

The child abuse scenario was my immediate reaction and interpretation; however, after the end of the piece, and after I went home and began seriously contemplating it, the viciously violent scenario began to replace itself with an equally tragic, but not quite so formidable, interpretation. I began to see it as more of a death of spirit than of bodily harm. The girl was begging for attention, trying with all her might to be noticed, but when she was not acknowledged she wilted. Her spirit withered away and died; it felt like she had given up, and without the process of begging for attention there was just nothing left but to curl up on the floor. Though this was not my initial interpretation, it has come to profoundly effect the way I see the work and my memory of it.

The vocal portion of the piece was an integral part of the whole. Ms. Brenner has a beautiful, expressive voice that filled the auditorium and resonated within the audience at times. However, the vocal content had

a much greater significance than any musical accompaniment would allow, and was more expressive than a recording of her own voice could be. By accompanying the piece with her own voice while she was dancing, she was able to accurately and convincingly express the childlike quality of the piece. I do not believe I would have been able to immerse myself into the piece or visualize the child had Ms. Brenner not been reciting the children's poem or belting out loud notes on stage. It made the effect more real and more dramatic for me. Ms. Brenner manipulated her voice and movements together to create an integral dance performance that helped me immerse myself into the piece. Her voice helped draw me in, make me laugh, and make me want to cry.

For me, the effect of costuming was minimal, but important enough that I feel it deserves some reflection. She was wearing a small, crumpled pink nightgown, that, at times, could be a little revealing. It was the nightgown of a little girl, one not concerned with her appearance, only with the attention she can receive. The wrinkled nightgown gave me a time frame for the dance; either at night before bed or in the morning right after waking up, or both. When she would sit down and you could see up the skirt, it was reminiscent of a little girl at home, where modesty is usually thrown out the window until you reach your teen years. Her costume did add an extra layer to the performance. Without the pink nightgown I would still have gotten the same emotions out of the piece; however, I feel the costume allowed me to be more in tune with the piece as a whole.

Overall, "Solo for Janis" was very emotionally draining. I was relieved by the humor in the beginning and looking forward to a lighthearted dance, but as the piece progressed, I could feel my mood shifting, getting darker and darker. I was startled, upset, maybe even traumatized by the tragic ending; even with the change in mood I still was not expecting such a powerfully sad finish. The piece was moving and meaningful, it was probably one of the most emotionally driven dances I have seen.

2. Live performances are the best. When a dancer is right in front of you: breathing heavy, sweating, putting all of his or her efforts into evoking some type of feeling from an audience, it is an experience like no other. I had not seen a full performance for so long that I was completely overwhelmed by the whole Atrik DecaDance show. All of the pieces spoke to me in some way or another, but there was something about "Solo for Janis" that really pulled me in. It made me feel uncomfortable and wonderful at the same time. I got chills while I was laughing. I came out of it confused and a bit stunned. I had to think about it for a while to even grasp what I had experienced.

I love performances that completely exhaust me by the time they are through. I don't mean only physical exhaustion from watching the dancer and his or her movements, but mental and emotional exhaustion from thinking, understanding and feeling the entire sense of the dance. When my mind is so focused on something for even a short time, I have a tendency to overanalyze what I have seen, felt, or heard. It was especially hard because I knew that the person I was watching had performed all over the world, and that her work was critically acclaimed (a NY Dance and Performance Award, a Lester Horton Award for Choreography, a Leach Fellowship, and a NY Dance On Camera Festival Award). I end up trying to make things more complicated than they are: this movement means suffering, this one means a sense of relief. Instead, this time, I tried to just let the feelings figure themselves out.

At first, the solo struck me as ironic. Irony is a hard enough thing to accomplish in a written work; it seems nearly impossible in a simple piece of movement, sounds, and spoken words. Still there it was: a performer with the full attention of the audience almost the entire time she is on stage, begging for more. I was confused. Janis already had me totally committed to her presence, as an award-winning dancer/ choreographer/ singer/ teacher should, and still she asked me to put more of myself into the piece. I did not quite know what to do; was I really supposed to laugh during a serious performance? It seemed strange to abandon theater etiquette entirely, but this is what I found myself doing. I was so drawn into the performance that I didn't realize until afterwards that I had been laughing quite aloud during much of it. I thought that I had

no more of myself to give, but it was drawn out of me as the dance progressed. I felt drained, but content. This, I think, is what Janis wanted, and she expressed after the show that she had hoped that the audience would react to her.

I felt odd that because my reaction was audible, it was not as private as it usually is during a performance. Of course, I wasn't the only one. Others seemed to have had a similar experience. It seemed strange, and I kept looking at others to see what they were feeling. Then I realized that it did not matter what they thought. Everyone's understanding is different. The way I felt this piece of movement was my own. Although I had reacted out loud to certain portions of the solo, no one but me knew what I was reacting to or why it happened. For example, when one of Janis' sequences of movements reminded me of something I would do when I was younger (especially the attention seeking or the nursery rhyme with the repeating moves), it was either an amused or nostalgic sensation that came over me. If it was hard for me to tell the difference, how could someone who was observing only the outward reaction understand what I was experiencing?

I also noticed that the beginning of the piece felt like a game to me. The more people reacted to her, the more Janis played to the audience. There was more to it than this, though. Something else was tugging at my mind. It started when I noticed that Janis' facial expressions grew more noticeable when she stopped the other movements. I realized that I was concentrating so hard on what her face was saying to me that I didn't notice that her hands or arms had changed. It was a little unnerving, like something else was moving her. I began to believe that I was not as committed to the performance as I should be. How if all of my energy was devoted to watching the dance was I missing entire movements? I felt almost like I was betraying the trust of a good friend. It was as if I promised Janis that I would devote my full attention to her, and then turned away to attend to someone else. I was angry with myself. I did not take into consideration until afterwards that this could be part of the game. Then I felt like I had been betrayed; I did everything that I could to put myself out there for her, and she used my attention against me. All I could think was "She's good at this!"

Another part of the piece that greatly influenced me was the vocalization. I was amazed by the fact that while she was dancing, Janis could be providing her own soundtrack. She has a lot of background, as she has performed with Meredith Monk and the Vocal Ensemble since 1990. Also she has recently released a debut CD, MARS CANTATA. Her vocal talents only added to the effect of the piece; she would go from a rhythmic nursery rhyme to total silence to sounds that I never knew a human being could make. I was greatly affected by the end of the piece largely because of her sound. It was so miserably sad and pitiful. I almost wanted to cry and run up to the stage to comfort her. The mood change was so gradual, and yet at the conclusion it was easy to determine that the once silly and lighthearted piece had become something dark and even somber. I felt so much different, and it seemed almost like she had become a different performer. All I could feel was "WOW!" My mind was racing, and I felt so satisfied. I knew that Solo for Janis had been one of those pieces that forced me to feel things that I will not soon forget.