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You Gotta Be a Survivor

A choreographer turns a concert into a thank-you party
by Deborah Jowitt
February 13th, 2007 5:24 PM

Janis Brenner's 25th anniversary season celebrates not only her talents and the longevity of her company but her mentors and colleagues over the years. Murray Louis, in whose company Brenner danced, and who turned 80 in November, is honored with a revival of the second movement of his 1974 *Porcelain Dialogues*, set to a Tchaikovsky Quartet. The dreamy gentleness with which six dancers glide into bridges and looping chains is made all the more charming by the fact that these six are alumni of Louis's former company. And how happy Michael Blake, Betsy Fisher, Peter Kyle, Sara Pearson, Robert Small, and Brenner look to be dancing together again! The only sad note is that Danial Shapiro, who passed away last year, was supposed to be among them.



A bright, well-tended world
Photograph by Tom Caravaglia

Janis Brenner & Guests
Danspace Project at Saint Mark's Church
February 1 through 4

If intermission is a bit delayed on opening night, it's because Louis, invited onto the dance floor during the bow, has to embrace every one of "his" dancers (he gets a cake too).

Each night of the run, Brenner presents a piece by a different cherished associate. She has a terrific singing voice and won a "Bessie" for her performance in Meredith Monk's *Politics of Quiet*. So at the first performance, we see and hear Monk, on film, deliver two of her magical songs from the Hill; then Brenner, live, sings a third, "Wa-lie-o-oh," with meticulous artistry.

Richard Siegel is one of her special guests, but she performs his hilarious Solo for Janis every night. Several brass fanfares precede Brenner's less than grand entrance. Emerging from one of the doors beside the church's altar platform, a small woman in a pink satin slip, she walks around awkwardly, swinging her right arm when her right leg steps, ditto with the left (try it). The solo is a display of performer nerves and bravado. Brenner finally manages to stay on onstage, but whispers "I think I can I think I can," as she wobbles, stretches dramatically, and tries out various stances and displays of power (like a high note held for a shockingly long time). Finally in love with the being the center of attention, she takes forever to expire—not so close to death that she can't crawl into a pool of light.

As a choreographer, Brenner has a sense of spatial design and visual imagery that may derive part from her training with that optical wizard, Alwin Nikolais. But unlike Nikolais, she uses these skills to convey mysterious events and emotional states. Her 2006 *Lake*, originally a dance video, opens with a projected landscape; small figures of a man and woman sit beside a lake. Live performers (Lindsey Dietz Marchant and Jason Dietz Marchant) then replace the filmed couple. In this duet for one, the man sleeps, and the woman dances—raptly, beautifully—as if a swim in the cold lake has refreshed her in some deeper way. Shaking her wet hair, she frees herself. The solo seems long, but

Brenner cleverly creates suspense. When will the man wake up? Will he wake up? He does rise—seconds before the end and after his partner has left—to discover a note she has placed by his hand. Hes still staring at it when the stage lights fades, and he reappears in the video.

Michell Bogards marvelous and complex lighting for the concerts seven works is a crucial part of the visual design. In the 1994 solo, *Shun Woa*, blue-green gradually changes to red, mottling the immense bronze silk skirt from which a mans bare torso rises. To spare, vivid taped music by Ushio Torikai and Tan Dun, Kun-Yang Lin wrestles with the fabric, first whipping his torso into tense, carved positions, then lashing the silk so that it spirals



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Bodies The Exhibition

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up around him. In light that's now completely scarlet, the images he creates recall the fin-de-siècle displays of Loie Fuller. Except that Fuller never stepped out of vast costumes as Lin does—unconstrained, but still in some way bound to his shimmering prison.

In Contents May Have Shifted. . . (2002), Katherine Fisher also moves in a confined space. Green strip lights enclose a short rosy corridor, down which she picks her way. Wearing pointe shoes and a gray unitard by Clifton Aubrey Hyde that leaves one leg bare, she wraps her arms around herself in crooked ways that belie the certainty with which she deploys her strong legs. In the end, she bourrées backward into darkness.

Fisher also figures in Brenner's rich A "Peace" for Women, which premiered in 2000 on the "Celebration for Peace" concert in honor of the United Nations Millennium Summit Conference. Six white-clad dancers (four of them guests from the Juilliard School) lead one another in patterns that bespeak harmony and equality; they're at ease whether leading or following, whether participating or looking on. Simply walking forward, to Steve Reich's splendid Proverb, they seem to rinse the space.

Sometimes the dancing is ceremonious, and small, upward shining lights along the wall behind the church's altar platform enhance that ritualistic glow. But other passages seem more spontaneous, and a recurring scene for Fisher and Jason Dietz Marchant expresses the tensions of male-female intimacy in a few spare strokes. These two appear five times over the course of the piece, in a corner near the audience. In the first, the woman sways seductively, the man unbuttons her blouse and falls on her. In the second vignette, she wears a head scarf and unbuttons her own blouse; the two exit. By the end, they're sitting side by side, fully dressed, listening, like us, to words by Wittgenstein that inform the music: "How small a thought it takes to make a world."

The many small thoughts Brenner has accumulated over 25 years of dancemaking amount to a very bright, well-tended world.