

# The New York Times

Published: November 14, 2009

## **DANCE REVIEW | JANIS BRENNER** **Invoking Departed Friends and the Flights They Took**

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

Ulysses Dove, Rudolf Nureyev, Arnie Zane: these names and others fill a page in the program for Janis Brenner's "5 Decades" show, which opened on Thursday night at the Joyce SoHo. And this list accounts for just a very few of the choreographers and dancers who died of AIDS during the 1980s and '90s.



In a premiere, "Dancing in Absentia," Ms. Brenner pays tribute to this lost generation through choreography, song and an affecting video of still photographs designed by Jamie James Wenger: all the men on the list, their ghostly black-and-white images floating over Rothko-like color fields. Many are in full performance flight. Inevitably, they dissolve.

Ms. Brenner's fluid, rather stock modern dance phrases coalesce before the screen; the flesh-and-blood dancers (appealing performers, all) make their strongest impact when doing less, or even nothing at all, standing at attention while Ms. Brenner sings a wordless lament.

Her fierce, liquid voice is commanding. She has long performed with Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble, and on Thursday, to open the "5 Decades" program, she danced Ms. Monk's "Break" (1964).

Nothing stock here: the brief solo takes its silliness seriously, building a strange little world out of spoken phrases, an industrial sound collage, gesture and striking, briefly held poses. Ms. Brenner is a witty, winsome performer, adept at teasing out the ambiguities of any given moment.

Her two older works on this program might do with a bit more ambiguity. "A Matter of Time" (1995) presents a tortured love quadrangle, with Kyla Barkin and Moo Kim desperate to leave their equally desperate lovers for each other. David Karagianis's layered, rhythmic score begins with a metronomelike pulse, and it is, indeed, only a matter of time until the restless escapees slip their partners' lunging, lashing efforts to hold them.

Ms. Barkin is all alone in "Guilt" (1985), isolated in a three-sided wooden structure roughly the size of a phone booth (remember those?). There are two doorknobs, and Ms. Barkin is torn, alternately twisting her trim body and flattening it against one or another of the walls, accompanied by Marianne Faithfull's throaty thoughts on remorse.

Also on the program was "Figura" (1978), by Murray Louis (for whom Ms. Brenner once danced). Aaron Selissen and Sumaya Jackson are ships in the night in this handsome, slight duet, which suggests a less finalized sense of loss than "Dancing in Absentia."

*Janis Brenner & Dancers perform through Sunday at the Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer Street; (212) 352-3101, joyce.org.*