

## Dance

## River to River festival, New York – mesmerising, harrowing

Two site-specific dance pieces by Jodi Melnick and Beth Gill took full advantage of their surroundings



'Catacomb' at Federal Hall © Darial Sneed

JUNE 20, 2017 by: Apollinaire Scherr

An hour before showtime, torrential rain threatened to return the moat around Governors Island's Revolution-era fort to its original purpose and wash out Jodi Melnick's River to River festival debut, *Moat*. But the "specific" in site-specific often includes nature's vicissitudes. So the show went on, unsunk by the mud because it was buttressed by a strong scheme.

On one side of the fort's cross-bridge a figure advanced with martial assurance along the grassy highway of moat, legs lunging and arms boldly semaphoring. On the other side, dancers flourished in a garden of artist John Monti's plastic flowers à la vintage TV show *The Dating Game*: a wry nod to public art's refusal to blend in. As one of *Moat*'s dancers, the mesmerising Melnick embodied this tension between the theatrical and the unassuming with steps declamatory one moment and murmurous the next. But as

choreographer she hasn't entirely embedded her mercurial brilliance in the steps' phrasing, for the other dancers to reproduce.



'Moat' at Fort Jay, Governors Island © Julieta Cervantes

The Federal Hall off Wall Street may have housed the first US Congress, but what resonates with the hour-long tour de force *Catacomb* is the monumental neoclassical design. New York choreographer Beth Gill has transferred her usual meticulous geometries to a harrowing excavation of experience: a *Cave of the Heart* were Martha Graham a millennial.

A single slow-motion phrase of lovemaking on repeat consumed the first several minutes. At the centre of the hard marble rotunda, Stuart Singer slid over Heather Lang to bury her face in his crotch, then rolled back like a human tide. *Catacomb* is preoccupied with what we cannot or will not see.

When Jennifer Lafferty entered the circle after skirting the massive columns, she studied the lovers without actually looking at them. And yet, by obsessive measuring and assessing everything around them, she intimated that they were products of her helpless imagination, as were the figures arriving one by one to complicate the picture. Dressed in monochrome, they may have been archetypes but they were also — like the best art and most dreams — unsummarisable.

★★★★☆ *Festival runs to June 25,*  
*rivertorivernyc.com*

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