

DANCE | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Dance for the People (by the Pros) at the River to River Festival

By BRIAN SEIBERT JUNE 20, 2017



Kareem Alexander Hewitt and Jodi Melnick performing in a preshow at the River to River Festival on Sunday. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

It's a lovely Sunday on Governors Island. Strolling toward the bridge into Fort Jay, you notice a crowd, or perhaps what it's looking at: Down in the grass-covered moat, amid Day-Glo-colored flower sculptures, people are dancing. Maybe you linger to watch.

Such surprises and discoveries are important parts of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's [River to River Festival](#). "Moat," by the dancer-

choreographer [Jodi Melnick](#), is as available — and free — to passers-by as it is to those of Ms. Melnick's devoted fans who are eager to see how she might transform a moat for three afternoons in June.

But the festival also fulfills other missions with its dance programming. It extends the life of works (like Beth Gill's "Catacomb") whose original runs, because of the economics of dance, are seldom much longer than three days. And it provides a home and money for projects so large and ambitious (like Netta Yerushalmy's "Paramodernities" and Wally Cardona and Jennifer Lacey's "The Set Up") that they might not fit anywhere else. The festival's first week had examples of all three types.

Neon Blossoms; Hints of Antonioni

For "Moat," the visual artist John Monti collaborated with Ms. Melnick on the cutout blossoms in neon hues. Though the props sent my mind to Alice and acid trips, the steadier impression arose from the loose structure: How the casually clad dancers periodically slipped into unison, as into something more comfortable. Using the long corridors to stretch her viewers' attention, Ms. Melnick and her liquid motion filled the moat with a pleasing picnic of inscrutable, activity.

It's hard to imagine a better setting for Ms. Gill's bold and haunting "Catacomb" than the Greek Revival rotunda of Federal Hall. This 2016 piece is extremely spare, strange and slow-moving, almost a memory play. Under the rotunda's oculus, it felt like a 3-D Antonioni film: the unease, the longueurs, the serious rewards.



Stanley Gambucci, left, and Nicholas Leichter in “Paramodernities” at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian on Thursday. Justin Gilliland/The New York Times

Deconstructing Graham and Ailey

Ms. Yerushalmy’s “Paramodernities #2 and #3,” at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, are installments of a proposed series in which she collaborates with scholars on deconstructions of canonical modern dance works.

In “#2,” as Ms. Yerushalmy and Taryn Griggs perform bits of Martha Graham’s “Night Journey,” the art historian Carol Ockman shares her thoughts on Graham. Presenting Graham as a forerunner to feminist theorists diminishes her, though the lecture-demonstration enlivens when the dancers assault the affable docent.

For “#3,” about Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations,” the chief collaborator is Tommy DeFrantz, a dance scholar who’s also a charismatic performer. His lecture is

theory-laden, but the questions he asks — about blackness, modernity, sexuality, freedom — are provocative, and his skeptical, sarcastic delivery gathers the urgency of a sermon.



Wally Cardona and Silas Riener performing “Princess” in “The Set Up,” at the River to River Festival on Sunday.
Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Meaning Without Attachment

“Paramodernities” is all about adding explanatory context. The audacity of “The Set Up” is to leave it out, at least from the performances. The walls of a room on Governors Island are covered with information about this long-gestating project, for which Mr. Cardona and Ms. Lacey have roamed the world, seeking instruction from seven masters of traditional forms (classical Burmese, Balinese Topeng and so on). Each of these cram sessions has resulted in a work. But only now, over last weekend and the coming one, are they being presented en masse in marathon form.

And though these works draw upon complex traditions rarely seen in New York, they offer no in-performance explication. Highly distinctive local dancers borrow choreography and gestures whose meanings they may not

understand, and on top of this, more confusion is piled: knowing jokes and live music (by Jonathan Bepler) that disorient and distract, often amusingly.

The sardonic voice in the Cambodia-inspired “Ghost” seems to be the project’s guiding spirit, reveling in an appetite for lost traditions “resounding in meaning without attachment,” whose “potential is not ruined by being realized.”

Performances by some of the masters (Heni Winahyuningsih, from Java, and next weekend, Proeung Chhieng, from Cambodia, and the unbelievable kutiyattam performer [Kapila Venu](#)) help audience members distinguish between the difficult refinement of the originals and some tiresome indulgence in the riffs. But the worth of “The Set Up” doesn’t depend on questions of authenticity; it’s in the moments of spellbinding beauty (concentrated in Mr. Cardona and the radiant, pregnant Molly Lieber) that would not have lived except through this complicated arrangement and River to River.

Correction: June 22, 2017

A picture caption on Wednesday with a Critic’s Notebook article about dance performances in the River to River festival misidentified one of the dancers in “Paramodernities.” He is Nicholas Leichter, not Jeremy Jae Neal.

River to River Festival
Through June 25 in Manhattan;
212-219-9401,
lmcc.net/program/river-to-river.