



Frostburg Summer Dance Retreat

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Flash Review 1, 7-16: Two for Posterity

The Enduring Dances of Mark Haim, Risa Steinberg, and the Ancestors

By Karinne Keithley

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Two splendid dancers, Mark Haim and Risa Steinberg, shared a Summerstage program Friday in Central Park, each performing excerpts from solo programs ("The Goldberg Variations" and "A Celebration of Dance," respectively) that are major works of their careers, and in different ways, of our moment. Besides the pure enjoyment of seeing the work, the program gave me cause to reflect upon longevity – of engagement in dance, of performance activity, and of working process.

I've been winding around and around the beginning of this paragraph about Mark Haim, trying to tame my enthusiastic superlative and find a solid entry point. I've long been of the opinion that Haim's 'Goldberg' is one of the masterpieces of this era in dance, an example of the finest possible results from research which combines many of the formal questions floating around the act of dancing (at least in downtown New York and its relations). Created over four years, the piece in its entirety is an 80-minute solo set to J.S. Bach's famous "Goldberg Variations," as played live by Andre Gribou. At Summerstage, Haim used a format that he also employs for lec-dems and school shows: After performing the central aria, he asked three people in the audience (who had already been given lists of variation numbers) to determine the program order as he went. Taking a number, he would

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perform the variation, and then return to the mic to ask for his next assignment. Though this format broke up the trajectory of the whole, it allowed a viewing which emphasized further the sense of probing study and daily work that brought about this piece of dance.

Like "The Goldberg Variations" themselves, the simplicity of the form belies the depth of the work. Taken separately, Haim's variations show their origins as studies (an inquiry into spoking, an accumulation puzzle), but the effect of watching several is far more complex than just a study of movement. There's such an integrity of persistence in this work-- an 80-minute solo created over four years, remember -- that Haim often reaches the liminal zone where the distinctions between formal, behavioral, abstract, literal, demonstrative and expressive all blur. These dances never leave the arena of what a single body can do -- few props or theatrical images enter into the sequence. But they begin, after a while, to resound with that complex sense of meaning at which dance excels -- meaning which doesn't employ the use of signifiers, but rather folds into each other the dimensions of being and knowing, of subject and object.

To be sure, the legible form of the music helps keep that objective eye going, but there is also something peculiar to Haim's dancing which does the same. I have said before that the thing I learned from Mark Haim's dancing is how to stop. Not just stopping movement through the entire body but loading that stop with something like high-powered surveillance equipment. Almost a report on coordinates and force vectors. It's a precision which becomes a communicable quantity. We feel it, watching. The same is true of his initiations. In the end, his clean command of it all renders the mechanics invisible, or at least irrelevant. We see a body, going through things remarkable and mundane, with no obfuscating filters. Perfectly visible. And extraordinarily beautiful.

It's too bad that we don't get treated to this more often. I made the unfortunate error of saving the bus fare and skipping my trip to New York in October of 1997, when the Goldbergs were performed at Danspace Project. Some funding god out there should really make sure that all us poor stiffs get to see this piece in its entirety again.

Bad luck have I: I also ended up out of town when Risa Steinberg performed "A Celebration of Dance" at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church (just a few months back), though I did catch it a few years back in Budapest. In this program of solos by choreographers ranging from Isadora Duncan to Ann Carlson, Steinberg also employs her virtuosic, clean command toward the end of making visible a wide body of work.

As a former member of the Limon Dance Company, Steinberg obviously has a stylistic affinity with classical modern dance modes. At Summerstage, she showed Duncan's "Baccanale" (1907) and Eleanor King's "Wrath" (excerpt from "Roads to Hell") (1940-41). There's a vivaciousness required by these works that isn't always necessary in more contemporary modern dance modes (we have different forms of reaching maximum energetic output). I feel lucky to see such a magnificent dancer performing these reconstructions. Of the two, I prefer "Wrath." The Duncan piece somehow lands in a spot where my engagement with it is principally historical, it's import entwined with its historical and political context. But next the external

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