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Giving Voice to the Unspeakable

"Memory/Place"

Nancy Karp + Dancers

ODC Theater

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by Rita Felciano

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Far be it from Nancy Karp, who has been making formally sophisticated dances without a thread of narration to them for thirty-five years, to plunge into the nightmare of the refugees who keep streaming into Sicily where she spends part of every year. Yet with the new "Memory/Place," she did. All of Karp's work is grounded in some kind of reality that she subsequently digests and muses over to then cull into expressions of space, time and shape. Karp also is a musically sophisticated listener and explorer, often of composers whose work stands at the edge of



Nancy Karp's "Memory/Place" Photo: John Hefti

contemporary music. She has in her repertoire compositions from Charles Amirkhania to John Cage, Terry Riley to Paul Dresher. Much of the music she uses has been commissioned for specific dances. The hour-long "Memory/Space" may not have broken new formal ground for Karp, but it convinced by the clarity and individuality with which these very different dancers realized their tasks.

Set on four women (Janet Collard, Sonsheree Giles, Katie Kruger and Amy Lewis) and two men (Peter Cheng and Sebastian Grubb), Karp chose a three-act structure each of which is set to a different score. Kui Dong and Robert Honstein composed for violin and cello and solo violin respectively. For the third act Karp went to three movements from Lou Harrison's "Grand Duo", in part to honor the composer's centenary. Somewhat miraculously music and dance coexisted, and a few times even fused, convincingly. It helped that all of it was performed by some of the Bay Area's finest instrumentalists, Gianna Abondolo (cello), Sarah Cahill (piano) and Kate Stenberg (violin).

Karp choreographed "Memory" as juxtapositions of patterns, intersecting lines, parallels, mirror images, symmetries or lack thereof, and above all with a strong sense of a fractured ensemble engaged in a common goal. The movements were spare, non-inflected but strong and exacting. "Memory's" most literal image occurred in the opening passage when six dancers with their backs slumped over in various poses of

lethargy. They then coalesced on a platform (made up of benches) into the kind of war memorial that still can be found in small towns and villages in Europe.

Throughout, shadowy images might recall the refugees -- Giles carrying Collard like a dead body, a bent over woman carrying another on her back, Kruger whirl-winding as if she had lost any sense of direction--but these were fleet and immediately reabsorbed into geometries. You might have wanted to see more but the choreography worked with implications that were not always discernible, and that exactly kept you watching because you so powerfully felt a shaping hand.

The first act's women quartet poured in from the stage corners with powerful leg work and stretched out arms that suggested both strength and uncertainty. Arms and gazes reached for something out of sight while the feet just kept going. The dancers reached for their ankles to make their feet stay on pattern. The dancing was tense, highly energetic but individualized. A sense of inevitability kept drama away though the screeching violin and cello spoke loudly. Strikingly, Giles cupped Collard's head from atop as if it was about to fall off. These women were drawn to each other by a common impulse but they never became close. Kruger and Lewis' duet struck by the difference in which Kruger, tall and powerful, and the fleet Lewis attacked their temporary relationship.

For the second movement Cheng and Grubb made a wary slow-stepping entrance upstage. Grubb was being pulled to the ground by some invincible force, and Cheng quickly leapt into spinning turns. A duet for Grubb and Giles pushed opposed forces against each other but seemed quite impersonal. He hoisted Lewis like a bag over his shoulders and then lifted her as if she were a beam. By then the benches had divided the stage into two halves where different unison duets on either side became split camera images.

The three Harrison movements changed "Memory's" tenor; the dancing became more turbulent. It opened with the sextet again sitting dejectedly, though now upstage. However, Cahill's masterful piano could not be resisted. At least for Lewis whose sweeping turns and back bends landed her in Cheng's arms. Giles -- if I saw properly -- was sitting on Grubbs' lap. Kruger and Collard leaned against each other until pulled apart. When all six raced downstage, they seemed ready to jump into the audience. They didn't. But in the 'Stampede' they couldn't resist something as metaphorically telling as a circle dance.