

Signs Of Intelligent Life

Joe Landini | Bay Area Reporter | July 2006

Erika Shuch's new dance-theatre piece *ORBIT (notes from the edge of forever)* is a really smart meditation on connection and faith. The ESP (Erika Shuch Performance) Project presents a polished, well-crafted, full-length evening at Intersection for the Arts that features talented collaborators and some pretty good performances, and shows definite ideas about where San Francisco contemporary dance is heading.

The evening begins with Sean Riley's set design, rotating stacks of old books, lamps and televisions. Immediately the tone is set, and Riley has clearly set us up for the piece. Shuch and Danny Wolohan play a pair of misfits looking for signs of extra-terrestrial life while trying to make a connection. It becomes evident quickly that Shuch has done her research; her text is intelligent, and we know that we are safely on a journey with a pilot who knows our ETA.

Early in the piece, Shuch introduces Melanie Elms, a femme fatale out of an early Ed Wood sci-fi flick. All she is missing is her Martian antennae. Elms is the primary antagonist in Shuch's non-linear exploration of pop culture, paranoid delusions and astrophysics. Rounding out the cast is a Fed Ex chorus led by Elms, filling in the kinesthetic blanks with loose contact-improvisational choreography.

Shuch is a director clearly in control of her tools, and she guides her collaborators well, integrating music from Daveen DiGiacomo (vocal direction by Dwayne Calizo), video design by Ishan Vernallis and contributions from the performers. This might actually be one of the drawbacks to the piece: every collaborator is talented, and Shuch effortlessly incorporates every good idea that comes down the pike.

Unfortunately, *ORBIT* is so full of great ideas and interesting material that it appears to meander a bit at times and could use some judicious editing, perhaps even a dramaturge. Shuch's performance is stellar, but eclipses the other artists; one can't help but wonder if she could have helped them flesh out more powerful performances if she had not

performed in the piece. Since Jessica Robinson is listed with "directorial assistance," perhaps Shuch realized she needed more of an outside eye during the development of the piece.

ORBIT is dense, and by the end of the evening, your head begins to hurt trying to navigate all the ideas. Shuch is working with so many strands and presenting so many new ways to look at the material, it becomes difficult to follow the piece. It's best to just let it wash over you. For many years, contemporary dance explored basic universal themes with stock archetypes, but Shuch is part of a new breed of dance artists who are tackling more complex ideas and supplementing them with theatrical devices like text, music and video. Ultimately, Shuch's piece is about two people trying to connect, and the obstructions along the way. As fascinating as all the extraneous components were, what we really wanted to know was: What's going to happen to Shuch and Wolohan, and did Elms get beamed back up to space?