

Doing Time

Chloe Veltman | Critic | September 16, 2008

As I strolled through downtown San Francisco yesterday afternoon, I couldn't help but wonder if all the tower blocks, traffic, stores, roads and other signs of "civilized" life would exist if we didn't have clocks – if we didn't have a system for regulating this slippery notion known as time. If human beings had only nature's cycles upon which to count to figure out what to do when, would the economy as we know it not exist? Maybe so, because without clocks, the concepts of past and future would cease to be meaningful in the same way. Maybe people would live more in the present, and the present is less concerned with shoring up future wealth, getting people to meetings on time, and otherwise endlessly driving towards some fictitious notion of progress.

The elusive nature of "now", the slipperiness of memory, and human beings' unsettling hopes and fears about what lies ahead form the backbone of Erika Chong Shuch Performance Project's mesmerizing new production, *After All, Part 1*. I caught the show yesterday afternoon during its way-too-short run at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and spent the rest of the day wandering around the city feeling like I was walking through a completely unfamiliar world.

Shuch's 80-minute piece marries whimsical songs and earth-bound choreography with short plays by Octavio Solis, Michelle Carter and Philip Kan Gotanda. Shuch performs theatrical alchemy by seamlessly fusing the seemingly very different texts – about such things as the world as viewed through the eyes of a goldfish (their memories are not as short as people popularly think), a man's experience on a beach, and a charismatic preacher's delivery of something he calls "the last psalm" – into a dreamlike, engrossing, bleakly humorous whole.

The brilliance of Shuch's work is that it manages to convey several complex ideas about the world we live in without once being didactic. The aesthetics of her productions are simple yet always visually stunning. In this one, hoards of dancing "extras" memorably plod across

the stage dragging each other by the ankles in assorted white outfits, and appear in several scenes bopping maniacally like they're at a 1950s high school hop. Thus Shuch creates a humorous version of heaven that is equally, and less funnily, reminiscent of a lunatic asylum.

Shuch also has a brilliant way of working with artists whose talents lie in more than one area. In this production, the versatile choreographer Joe Goode demonstrates his skills as an actor in the role of the deadpan 'Man at the Sea' character. Matthias Bossi's preacher plays a mean percussion. Beth Wilmurt's goldfish is as adept at delivering Carter's goldfish text as she captures, through a perfect symbiosis of observation and fantasy, the watery creature's way of moving and singing. Dwayne Calizo's sinister Santa Claus brings tears to our eyes with his soulful renditions of originally-composed songs and standards by the likes of Simon & Garfunkel. Similarly, the corps of four dancers turn out to be adept with language: at one point, the dancers perform an aggressive, almost tribal-feeling dance while percussively chanting the mantra "fuck, no!" over and over again in different rhythms and groupings.

Shuch deserves wider exposure. Having experienced many of her shows over the past few years, I've come to see her as one of the most thoughtful, playful and complete performance-oriented artists working in this country today. *After All, Part 1* makes me want to develop a different relationship with time. But I'll still be counting the weeks until Shuch unveils the sequel to this production, *After All, Part 2*.

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