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**Letter from NY, 5-24:
Acrobats of time,
mothers without mothers**

**Stenn & Donohue: Why are two
'90s superstars performing in
50-seat houses?**

by Paul Ben-Itzak

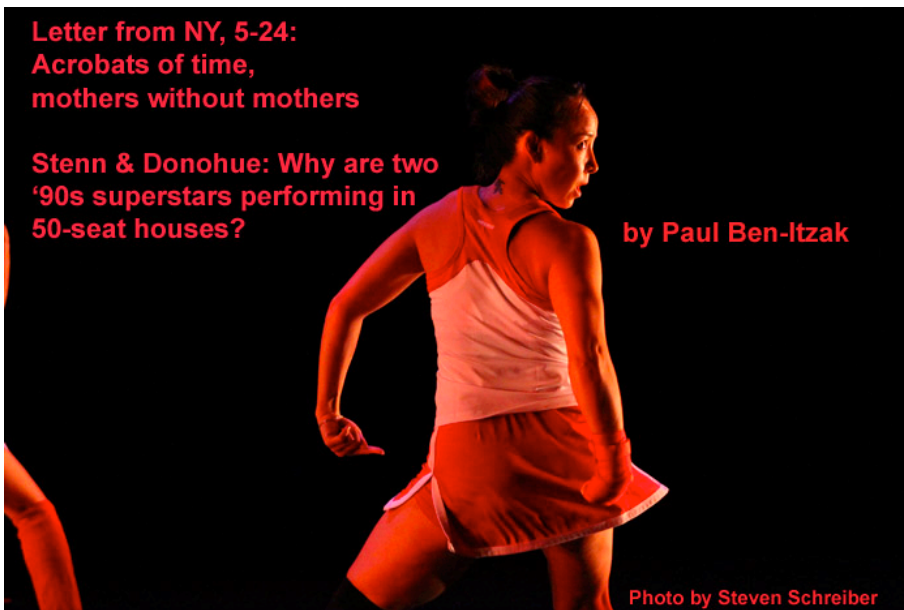


Photo by Steven Schreiber

Maura Nguyen Donohue of Maura Nguyen Donohue / InMixedCompany in her "Strictly a Female Female." Photo ©Steven Schreiber.

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NEW YORK -- One evening back in the 1990s, my friend the choreographer and dancer Rebecca Stenn and I were sitting in a tapas bar in the Village, where a Scandinavian presenter was telling us about Sasha Waltz, already the rage in Europe. In the intervening years, Waltz would go on to be given her own building in Berlin and enough additional means, from Germany and leading theaters throughout Europe, to basically work with whatever and as many artists as she wanted to in multiple genres and, most of all, the luxury of time to create new work. She never had to put her own work aside to take a teaching job so she could pay the rent and raise a family, thus risking the loss of creative momentum that might come with that. She was also given the means to hire a full-time dramaturge to make sure the work was disciplined.

If Rebecca Stenn and Maura Nguyen Donohue (like Rebecca, a former longtime Dance Insider contributor) had been working in Europe, this is the kind of support they would have received. And deserved; each, seen Sunday in back-to-back concerts at the 50-seat West End Theater, located on the second floor of a church on the upper west side, is (at least) on a par with Sasha Waltz, their contemporary, as far as choreographic ingenuity (Stenn), story-telling ability (Donohue), originality, singularity of vision, and musicality (both). But they had the bad luck (as artists I mean) to be creating work in turn of the 21st century New York City, where, even if the supply of talented dancers is plentiful, the major institutions that should have supported their work -- and I don't mean by space grants or teaching positions, but by commissioning it on a regular basis -- specifically the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center, the Joyce Theater, New York City Ballet, and

American Ballet Theatre, didn't. These institutions, all of whom like to claim New York City as the capital of dance, failed to nurture two of the signature artists who emerged from the New York scene in the mid-'90s and who had the power to travel so far in their art -- taking us, as critics and audience with them -- but who were essentially orphaned at their creative births.

Now, Stenn would protest at about this point that no, she had space grants from the Joyce and teaching work from Lincoln Center. Donohue would probably stick up for the New York dance community, arguing that she had the opportunity to be integrally involved in Dance Theater Workshop as a board member, and institute programs there which had an impact locally and globally. Both would say that they love teaching, thank you.

But this is not what I'm talking about.

I am speaking specifically about the work. In France, where I lived and covered the arts for ten years, the work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Sasha Waltz, Pina Bausch, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Akram Khan and, more recently, Israel Galvan, was presented -- and, frequently, co-produced by the presenting theaters -- every single year. And this is before we even get to the French choreographers, most visibly Angelin Preljocaj and Maguy Marin. And before we even mention that 20 of them have their own, largely State-funded regional choreographic centers, where they are able to make work year-round, the only expectation being that they will perform it and that they will open their doors occasionally to their regional communities.

Now, as a colleague here at the DI has pointed out, one outcome of such blank check support can be that the artist is not hungry and has no incentive to keep the quality of the work up. I have seen this occasionally; most of Josef Nadj's work of the past ten years that I've caught has been derivative, and yet he has that choreographic center in Orleans for life if he wants it. But none of the others mentioned above show any sign of laxity. De Keersmaeker has made some groaners, and Preljocaj went through a fallow period, but they rebounded, and in a Europe where the new generation of choreographers seems not that interested in choreography, they have become the keepers of the kinetic flame.

Which brings us to Rebecca Stenn and Maura Nguyen Donohue.



Rebecca Stenn of Rebecca Stenn Company in her "Fantasy, Lies, Hubris and Voyeurism."
Photo ©Julie Lemberger.

Like De Keersmaeker, Stenn believes in music. Unlike De Keersmaeker, she doesn't repeat herself a lot. In terms of pure choreographic invention -- on her own body and for ensembles -- Stenn was the most rigorous American choreographer of her generation. She has sometimes been dismissed as 'that Momix girl,' but in fact, the most important gift she took from Moses Pendleton -- the Momix director and Pilobolus co-founder whose primary muse she was for a crucial 6-year period -- was not his compositions but his ability to compose, to select and edit. Unlike Waltz, who usually makes heavy use of props, Stenn, who at Momix learned how to use them and thus **could have** continued to rely on props, gradually and bravely cast them away, little by little. Her latest work, "Fantasy, Lies, Hubris, and Voyeurism," which premiered last weekend at the West End Theater, had none.

So what did it have?

First, it had Rebecca Stenn, as performer. Like De Keersmaeker, she has her own aura and glow. She is luminous. Possessed. Enchanted. On one of the first occasions I saw her, performing a solo at the Miller Theater years ago to 'accompany' an orchestra, I thought of what it must have felt like to watch Martha Graham perform. This is how Stenn transfixes; she doesn't need to insist on the spotlight; it finds her.

Now, imagine watching Martha Graham -- not at the beginning of her career but, say, in 1946 -- perform in an upstairs room of an uptown church with 50 seats and the woofer under one of the seats, it's that small. (Imagine Louis Horst accompanying her and having to have his music filtered through an inadequate sound system.) It broke my heart to see an artist of this stature performing in a theater that did not match her grandeur. This is not to belittle what David Parker and Jeff Kazin have done in making this space available. Apparently the church offered them its use three times a year for Parker's Bang Group to perform; Parker responded that he had enough opportunities, thank you, but could he use the space to feature other artists? In other words, Parker and Kazin, artists whose responsibility it isn't, are doing what Joseph Melillo at BAM should be doing, and

nurturing and fostering the native talent, while Melillo lets the true next waves -- for this is what Stenn and Donohue were in the '90s -- peter out. (The only resemblance most of the dance artists BAM presents have with waves is they both have white on one end.)

Okay, but what does this mean in practical, danceviewing terms? I have known and been following Stenn long enough that, at Sunday's performance, I could eventually see past the frame and still be awestruck that in one solo she managed to capture an entire life of dance learning and unlearning, from her pointed feet (Royal Winnipeg Ballet school) to her fast pivots (thank you, Juilliard) to twisting limbs (born at Momix, given poetic resonance by Stenn) to intricate hand ballets (her own innovation) and sometimes arch regard (ditto; born of Momix silliness, given nuance by Stenn), even to an uber-story of this miniature referencing "Coppelia" and all that says about the manipulation of dance bodies by directors and choreographers. So the artistic richness does surpass the humble setting, but....

What does the lack of support through programming her mean in critical terms? It means that instead of getting the top shelf critic at the NY Times, as she likely would have were she, say, being presented by BAM in the cadre of its Next Wave festival, she gets the one who only plays a critic on t.v. and who, predictably, doesn't get the above solo, witnessing the same movement and movement qualities I just described above but, not being an actually qualified dance critic, records it as "toe-heeling her feet in time to Chopin while rolling her shoulders forward and sticking out her rear." This isn't dance criticism. This is crass. It is vulgar. It is ultimately uncouth, uneducated, untrained, and uncultured.

(Do Gia Kourlas's editors at the NY Times have any idea of the existential critical horror they provoke among choreographers when they assign this woman to review their concerts? And that it doesn't have anything to do with whether or not she likes their work, but disappointment that where high aesthetic faculties, perception, and expression are called for, they send someone with a locker room vocabulary? I mean, "sticking out her rear"?! HOW IS THAT CRITICISM? What self-respecting critic talks like that? And what self-respecting journal would send a critic who talks like that to review a work of art?)

No, Gia. In fact, what Stenn was doing was not "sticking out her rear" but using time-tested Chopin to take a sophisticated rear-view voyage through time and in the process, miraculously, give new life to this almost 200-year-old tune. Making old music seem new. This is one of the things that dance, at its best, can accomplish. (Well, for those who have eyes to see it, anyway.)

But of course, artists shouldn't be ruled by what critics say -- whether they be pretend critics like Gia or inadequate critics like me. More important is the work, and a more important consequence of the failure by BAM and the other major NY dance institutions mentioned to support *and* present her work is that Stenn doesn't have sufficient time to devote to and develop it. For while she was preparing "Fantasy, Lies, Hubris and Voyeurism" she was also teaching at the New School and serving as dance mentor and choreographer with the National Association for the Advancement of the Arts and, with her husband and musical collaborator Jay Weissman, raising two kids, among other things. It's clear that while the individual parts of this new ballet are deft, the ensemble (of fellow veterans Trebien Pollard, Eric Jackson Bradley, and John Mario Sevilla) better woven (I'm trying to avoid using the over-used "seamless") than I've ever seen in this genre (for want of a better word, the amoeba genre -- and I don't use the term sarcastically -- in which individual dancers become part of a thriving larger body), they haven't yet been organized into a clear over-all theme expressed in a dance story with a defined beginning, middle, and end.

BUT -- and this is critical -- this doesn't make the work a failure. It makes it a beginning. This is the stage at which a Joe Melillo -- well, if this were the television program FRINGE, it would have to be the alternate world Joe Melillo -- would step in and in lieu of saying, "But does it have the potential to sell tickets?" say, "But does it have the potential to be a fully developed, powerful, and perhaps even pioneering work that moves the form forward?" Which, of course, it does, but which, unfortunately, it won't be given the chance to become because the New York universe in which Rebecca Stenn landed is not the one of 1926 or even 1946 or '56, when talented choreographers might find themselves on Broadway, picked up by a savvy producer, or even commissioned by New York City Ballet, but the one of 2011, when the big presenters in town -- BAM, Lincoln Center, the Joyce -- lack the courage, foresight, and most of all, genuine investment in the art to know a good thing when they see it and nurture it, and when the big ballet companies like New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, lead by directors with no vision and boards who can't tell the difference, prefer to present, again and again, middling talents like Christopher Wheeldon to recognizing and utilizing the choreographic genius (not just Stenn, there are more) in their own backyard.

(A last, practical, suggestion for Stenn for this work: Brave as the musical choice was -- in a post-post-modern context -- to use Chopin, I would go further and use it exclusively. Save the Weissman original music for another occasion or, if you must, use it even more choicely: Pick one spot. Also think of experimenting more with silence. There was one moment where the only noise was what sounded like a choir filtering in from another part of the church. This actually enlarged the

work's context, situating the dancers' movement as a sort of oblivious and determined counterpoint to whatever was going on outside.)



Maura Nguyen Donohue / InMixedCompany in Donohue's "Strictly a Female Female." Photo ©Steven Schreiber.

If Rebecca Stenn's genius was to take the genus *Momix*/*Pilobolus* beyond the comedically gripping, sexually alluring, and physically impressive to the terrain of kinetically challenging, musically broadening, and sometimes even intellectually provocative, Maura Nguyen Donohue's genius with her Maura Nguyen Donohue / InMixedCompany was to resuscitate the 'social issues' genre and infuse it not just with artistic integrity but entertainment and cross-genre originality and fluidity. The main reason Donohue's new "Strictly a Female Female" seems to work in the West End Theater space where Stenn's doesn't has to do with the format she's chosen, which includes lots of audience interaction and participation. This starts from the moment veteran *Slant* virtuosos Rick Ebihara and Perry Yung enter as supposed sailors just arriving in town as well as at the show before curtain. As with her earlier "Lotus Blossom Itch," the *Slant* guys do help to lighten the message and are thus part of the reason Donohue is able to make social issues / message work as theater. But it's not just that. Dressing her mostly female (and one female impersonator) and all attractive (including the female impersonator, Timothy Edwards) cast in bright orange shorts and white tank tops, Donohue may be saying it's normal for guys to gawk at cute mostly Asian women (herself, Peggy Cheng, Miri Park, and Jessica Colotti) in shorts, or she may be catching you in the act before she sucker punches you with your political conscience, but whichever it is, the net effect is to open you to her message.

That message isn't really new, concerning itself as it does with responding to racial and sexual stereotyping and gawking, mostly though not exclusively as it pertains to Asian-Americans and women. However, the need for its reiteration is validated by ongoing provocations; most recently, as Donohue reminds us in an opening clip shown on the Ipod of one of the 'sailors,' in an anti-Asian-American tirade by Alexandra Wallace seen by millions on You Tube. (After the Ipod clip, the African-American and bearded Edwards takes over, lip-synching Wallace's recorded words. I note Edwards's race just to evoke the contrast of his skin color with the blonde wig he dons).

The artistic justification for Donohue's attacking this theme again is that it is, in fact, her matter. And what's interesting for a long-time observer of the way she's gone after it and worked with this particular clay is to see the growing sophistication of the artistic tools and elements with which she treats the subject. I've been watching social issues theater for 45 years, going back to a childhood in San Francisco in the 1960s reveling at the early efforts of the legendary San Francisco Mime Troupe, and I have to tell you no one has managed to transcend the social/political message -- to create actual art in lieu of just a polemic preached to the converted, I mean -- more effectively and eloquently than Donohue. In fact, this artist who called one of her works "Righteous Babe" understands it can actually be alienating -- let alone not in and of itself art -- to just get up on stage and be (self-) righteous. At this point, especially when one looks at the way she uses a multiplicity of elements to serve her palette, from the "RENT"-tested diva Miri Park (most notably in channeling Pat Benatar on "Hit me with your best shot") to the vocally versatile Ebihara, sampling everything from Rodgers and Hammerstein to Tim Rice ("One Night in Bangkok" -- did you even need to ask?) to Billy Idol, one almost has to ask whether the message isn't serving the medium, a relatively limited social/political question being tapped to create a richer work of art! If I can be permitted one trite critical cliché -- hey, at least you'll never catch me saying "she sticks her rear out"! -- Donohue has a hit on her hands. Park and the *Slant* guys push it into that territory -- the territory that could

and should go beyond the self-consuming dance crowd and on to Broadway. (I know, the powers that be there would rather revive the actual "Lady and the Tramp" then show us Ebihara, Yung, and Park riffing on one of its songs in a manner in which we only realize, deliciously, what the song is half-way into it, while Donohue and her Siamesers slink around in silken black kitty-wear.... And don't dwell on them too long with your devouring eyes and drooping tongue, you dog; in no time, Donohue introduces a 12-foot tall "Hello Kitty" puppet, developed by Ebihara, to scold the latches in the audience by baring its fangs and swatting Edwards-as-Wallace with its paw.)

Okay, so.... The piece works in this venue.... It's mostly finished... And it could be a hit on Broadway. Why, then, to quote another song covered by Bobby McFerrin (who also did the above-referenced "Siamese Cat Song"), why can't I just be happy for Donohue and not worry?

In her penultimate solo, Donohue almost cried, and brought me to tears, when she said that this was her first full new work in nine years. Nine years. That's a lifetime for a dancer. Now, for all I know, Donohue has been perfectly happy to devote most of her time to teaching at Hunter College, raising two kids, serving on the board of a crumbling (my opinion -- not hers) dance organization, write for the DI and others, start and lead the MeKong Project, etc., etc.. So it's quite possible that even if she didn't need to work as a teacher to support herself and, with her husband, support her family, even if BAM were presenting her work every year instead of (often) importing modern dance work from Europe that actually just copies what Donohue's predecessors in New York were doing 50 years ago and (sometimes) work from Asia that reinforces as opposed to owns, remixes, and responds to Asian stereotypes as she does -- it's quite possible that even if she were programmed every year at BAM or the Joyce to create new work, instead of the poseurs like Sarah Michelson that BAM in its quest for coolness chooses to commission (enabled, of course, by no-nothing Michelson enablers like Kourlas) -- it's quite possible that she would still want to teach just for the pleasure of it.

But.

Speaking just for myself, as a critic and as someone who believes in and loves this work, I tear up because I see her, at 40 or so (I'm not revealing any secrets; Donohue referred to her age in the solo), having attained a new, higher territory of being compelling, as a performer, than ever. (Emanating, as it so often does in a modern dancer -- see reference to Martha Graham, above -- in a potently expressive torso.) I cry because I -- we -- deserved to see her growing to this point every one of these last nine years, prime years for a dancer. (As audiences in Europe -- and sometimes at BAM!! -- have seen De Keersmaeker perform every year for the last 25 or so and had the pleasure -- dare I say, "rapture"? -- of watching her get better and better.)

And I get frustrated because, while her production values are high, her story-telling and entertainment instincts keen, and the group dance work has gotten tighter, Donohue's weakest suit is still... the actual choreography. And I cry because, knowing how disciplined she is, from the work she has given to so many others in this community, including me and my publication -- I cry because I wonder at what level her *choreography* might be at this point if she had been commissioned and presented every year at BAM. At the Joyce. At Lincoln Center. What she might have been capable of -- choreographically -- if, instead of encouraging work like that of Sarah Michelson, 90 percent spectacle and argument and 10 percent choreography -- the Joe Melillos at BAM and the Linda Sheltons at the Joyce had been, say, paying Donohue enough to make work so that she might...actually... be able to take a semester off from teaching "just to make work." (A colleague -- who hasn't seen this latest work -- even suggests that so many hours teaching might filter into the dancemaker's creative work and diminish it.) If they had not only commissioned a dance from Stenn so that she also could take time off to devote solely to making it, and really sift it through her own capable filters to see if it held together thematically, but paid her enough so that she might even be able to bring in a dramaturge, or a Moses Pendleton. Not because she needs the choreographic help but just as a sort of sage to give her a seasoned opinion on whether the narrative held together, and if not to observe and give feedback while she tried different ways to make it work. (Space grant; schmace grant. What Stenn and Donohue need is time.)

So while I applaud these artists for what they have achieved and accomplished in so little time, and for their determination to keep choreographing and creating amongst all their other responsibilities, and I applaud the presenters David Parker and Jeff Kazin for sacrificing their own interests for those of their peers, I say shame on BAM and the Joyce and Lincoln Center for abandoning their best and brightest. For closing their doors to them for 20 years. For leaving them -- the artists as well as Parker and Kazin (who turn their receipts over to the artists, while making a fraction of what Melillo and Shelton do for doing what they should be doing) -- to fend for themselves. No, it's worse than that. I say shame on BAM, the Joyce, and Lincoln Center for their curatorial cowardice, for their lack of mindfulness in not taking care of the legacy they inherited, for leaving these native New York artists from their own backyard orphans -- and there are surely more than Stenn and Donohue, these just happen to be the two cases I'm most familiar with because I care so deeply about these two women and believe so ardently in what they have been trying to create and continue to be amazed by their investment in their art and the field and their generosity to their colleagues, they are my heroes -- even as artists like Stenn and Donohue try to lead the art form

these major presenters pretend to be interested in advancing to a rebirth. If New York was once the champion of dance, its present governors have given up the title without a fight.

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