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Open Rehearsal: An Intimate Glimpse at John Jasperse's "Fort Blossom"

by Julie Diana

Two women and two men slink around the performance space, adjusting their leg warmers and waiting for John Jasperse to start rehearsal. Relaxed, these dancers mark through their choreography and stretch, apparently uninterested by the small audience gathered to watch them dance. Their casual indifference seems to be put-on, as if the performance has already begun. Jasperse gives the stage manager some notes and then turns to address his dancers. "We'll take it from 'Sabotage'," he says.

This open rehearsal for Jasperse's *Fort Blossom* begins with Lindsey Clark, Erica Hand, Ben Asriel, and Burr Johnson working with orange square bubbles; they toss the inflatable cushions in the air and catch them between their legs, then roll them, push them over, and hold them up like opposing magnetic force fields. As the dancers run in circles to festive samba rhythms, they have dropped their cool personas and now giggle like school children, crashing into one another, bumping, falling, and tumbling.

Jasperse, however, is displeased. Erica looks like a third wheel. Ben's bubble keeps losing air. They stop and start, repeating this section over and over. According to Jasperse, what looks carefree and wild must have direction and purpose to be effective. Lindsey suggests making a rule: You can only bash people if you make eye contact with them first. They try again, but Ben finds himself staring down two people at once. Everyone stops and clings to their bubbles, breathless. "Again," says Jasperse and tells his assistant to cue the music. Playtime, it seems, takes a lot of work.

The group finally moves to another section and splits into couples (woman/woman, man/man). The floor, half black marley and half white, reflects these opposite gender pairings; the ladies stay on the white side, the men stay on the black. Lindsey and Erica, their hair sweaty and matted against their foreheads, wear fitted tops and shorts while Ben and Burr have stripped down to tiny briefs (they'll be nude during the performance). Despite these visual disparities, their synchronized movements convey a sense of unity. Then Jasperse stops again. He spends nearly 30 minutes breaking down a sequence in which the two couples must roll and twist into a coiled repose.

Open rehearsals are just that – open. On display are a dancer's artistic craft but also his or her personality, work ethic, and temperament. It's clear who's having a bad day and who is able to maintain a good sense of humor. It's a chance to see who is vocal and who offers suggestions or expresses frustration. Burr mutters "Sorry!" mid-dance and smiles at his partner. They stop and go back to the place where he admitted his mistake, working out the mechanics and making the audience feel privy to behind-the-scenes tedious inner workings.

At one point during the hour and a half rehearsal, Ben lies with the top of his head on the floor, his body torqued sideways and ready to support Burr's weight. Jasperse has given him a correction and Ben responds, talking and laughing from his circus-like stance. Is he performing a bit? Probably. But spontaneous and engaging moments like this leave the viewer hungry for more and grateful that the artists have exposed their more personal selves. While an open rehearsal is not a formal performance, spectators are there, perched on the edge of their seats and ready to be engaged.

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