

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Makenna Finch

## Building an Altar to Remembrance

by Ellen Miller

“A rush of imagination is our ‘flooding,’” Toni Morrison writes, and indeed it is choreographer Tyler Rai’s imagination that has created the world of *flooding is what they call it*. Perhaps it is my lack of imagination or just the power of George Lucas’, but when the dancers enter dragging branches the length of their bodies with long lights attached, I see powerful warriors carrying colorful lightsabers. Proximity to nature feels significant in Rai’s work, and I wonder if my limited imagination is impacted by the setting, and how I would perceive elements like the lighted branches if we were outdoors or near water.

As tonal music plays, the dancers drag the lit branches along the floor, lift them in the air, and rub them against door frames and posts. Sound is granted just as much importance as movement in Rai’s piece, centering the work of composer José Alejandro Rivera (aka Proxemia). Rivera is equally a performer, not only adjusting lights but also playing physical instruments and walking barefoot around the stage in a circle with the other dancers as they intoned together, slowly rising in volume and enveloping the audience in the vibrations of a sound that felt almost like wailing.

*flooding is what they call it* takes its name from a Toni Morrison quote that portrays flooding as an act of remembering. This is most directly referenced when the dancers offer a basin of water to one another; one washes her face while another opts to dunk her hair into the water. It feels like a cleansing, and evokes similar themes of purification to another section where the dancers sweep and spin with bundles of dried plants. Towards the end, the dancers carry the lit branches, the bowl of water, and the bundles of dried plants to the front of the stage, forming a sort of altar.

*flooding is what they call it* closes with an act of naming: each performer takes the mic and adds to an “image description,” verbally marking things they see in the space: a purple mask, Tyler Rai in the front row, light peeking in from the curtains. It is a powerful centering exercise, grounding us in the present moment. As they return to the rear of the stage, holding the lighted branches aloft, they

have created a new memory for us, one we may recall in the next flood.

[\*flooding is what they call it\*](#), Tyler Rai, Fidget Space, Cannonball Festival, Philly Fringe Festival, September 28-30.

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