

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Anja Hitzberger

## Letter to the Whirl: The Crowd Circles Round

by Kirsten Kaschock

At thINKingDANCE's third and final Write Back Atcha event, audience members gathered around a conference table in a small room at the Christ Church Neighborhood House after watching David Zambrano's *Soul Project*. Matt Kalasky, a Philadelphia-based artist and art critic, offered the group imaginative prompts to help get them started writing about the series of improvisational solos they had just seen. Earlier in the evening, they'd wandered through the club-lit performance space upstairs, awaiting each new soul song and each dancer's soulful interpretation of that song, and then settling (and being directed by Zambrano to settle) around the performer for the duration of the song, only to rise at its close and mill through the space again. The impromptu, miniature theatres-in-the-round echoed the colored spotlights that illuminated both the soloists, dressed in apocalyptic-circus-wear, and the more sedately garbed crowd, encouraging the watching of both and offering an active—though strangely controlled—audience experience.

Below, find out how Philadelphia dance-goers described their evening in alternately poetic and analytical prose. Then read their love-letters/break-up letters (thanks, Matt!) to the performance, a performance which—though most found emotional and affecting—also settled into predictable patterns of improvisation that, in some cases, served to undermine those very qualities.

### *Descriptions*

Experiencing David Zambrano's *Soul Project* is a bit like going to church—the kind of church where something rapturous, sweeping, transformative, and spiritual is happening. Aptly titled, the series of gripping dance solos offer a glimpse of “soul” in its rawest sense, performed by seven dancers in close proximity to audience members who share the stage with them. The movement isn't performed so much as it emerges, sometimes startling those of us standing next to a dancer suddenly set in motion.

-Karl Surkan

The standing audience, in a bare, open space, moved from one area to another, much as groups assemble around street performers—jockeying for space, then settling down (in a large, open circle) with those seated in front. The dancers each performed solo to a soul song—not quite mimicry, not quite physical karaoke. Presumably [they] moved to the emotions of each song, but with a set of movement conventions common to all of them: attention-grabbing hand movements that added up to nothing comprehensible—a sort of babbling mudra—whole-body movements... motions that had the spastic quality of spiritual possession... [or] the awkwardness of dolls or automatons.

-Andrea Kirsh

The spirit moved through the audience like a vibrating engine accelerating and looping... like a catapulting trapeze artist without a trapeze... [W]hen David danced with an audience member who was sitting in a chair... it became a duet. David was vibrating and at times reaching out towards his dance partner. He began to dance himself out of his jacket, and reached out to another audience member who in turn touched his hand. David yelled "No! Take the jacket!" and we all laughed. [Then he] tickled his dance partner by walking his fingers up the other man's arm. For a moment, the dance and the audience blurred and intermingled.

-Colleen Hooper

Zambrano is dressed in a sort of candy cane zoot suit, a marvelous set of garments that turn out to be lined in emerald green. We are all clustered around him and one audience member, seated in a chair, shares the spotlight. There's a baby and her mama within a few inches, watching as this man twitches and cavorts in front of them. The baby is maybe six months, achingly cute, bright eyes watching every movement, face upturned to not miss anything this wild man does. Zambrano appears to be having his own heart broken by the baby.

-Ellen Chenoweth

## ***Letters***

Dear Soul Project

I never got tired of seeing you splat to the ground, and then rise like dough in some zero-gravity oven. I did get tired of seeing you vibrate, tremble, shake and shiver. And I missed seeing you cover space horizontally. But I did vicariously join you a bit as you were possessed by the music. And I fell in love with the jumping ringmaster who made no sound when he landed on the ground, took a breath, and started a new series...

-Madeline Cantor

Dear Soul Project,

This particular salvation—to bridge experience, emotion, embodiment—is the gift of being now... Pull us through the swamp of days.

Break through its calcifications of survival by the quiver of muscle, the quiver of a group of muscles. By explosion and hugeness of heart, by lash and synapse. What rises up from within to the permeable membrane between us. Cheek to cheek. Thank you for catching us up and relieving our intensity of bearing.

Hassen Saker

Dear Soul Project,

I was going to say "It's me, not you." But I have to admit, I was not physically wracked with pain and/or ecstasy after we stopped being together. It wasn't enough for you to simply sit in your room playing "Don't You Forget About Me" while you ate Cherry Garcia. No. You chose James Brown, Gloria Gaynor. Really? And the multicultural, lithe, vibratory avatars of your inner physical reflection—it was like watching a circus, a masturbatory circus of rending garments, and hair, and lost wigs. I was going to say—"It's not you, it's me..."

-Dan Marena

Dear Soul Project,

This fluidity and jerking, this waterscape of emotion that rises from the oppressive manifestations. What I love about you is the way you embody the feelings and simultaneously the expressive systems/structures/groups/individuals that hold us/me back. What I love about you then is the abstract and the concrete. Someone said catharsis. I say reminder upon reminder of the (in)ability (the universal) to break free. I love you because you made me move. I love you because you made me surge and fill, a bursting even to the point of bounce.

-Deborah Poe

Dear Soul Project,

I just can't hang with your lack of subtlety anymore. I don't think we can work it out. Or maybe I'm just too tired to try. I think that's part of the problem... I find you exhausting. Your flailing, thrashing, grinding, grimacing, pumping, primping, and peacocking just makes me want to look away. To escape. To find something softer. I love your music, sure...who doesn't? But I need more from you. Your overwhelming energy, rather than enticing me, ends up pushing me away and I just end up feeling uncared for. I really tried to love you.

-anonymous

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