

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: Brad Larrison

Precarious River: Beck Epoch on the Schuylkill

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Rio. Brussels. Jerusalem. Dallas. Nice. Turkey. Baton Rouge — a partial list of the past few months' anguished areas worldwide. It's hard to keep balanced in so fragile and fomentable a world. I hold onto shards of sanity and stability, as traces of the lost are gathered from the wreckage.

My husband, niece, and I—along with dozens of others still hungry for art, for thrills, and for preserving the places we know and love—pushed out onto the Schuylkill River in mid-July to rock and sway in rowboats, kayaks, and [dragon boats](#) on the river and watch four women balance, swing, and suspend themselves above the waters in *Beck Epoch* (meaning “river era,” according to a [press release](#)).

That press release had informed the public that the choreographers were Alie Vidich and Tatiana Hassan, and the performers Christine Morano and Shannon Sexton along with, I imagine, the two choreographers. Anyway, there were four women performing, and no programs provided, so I made my own surmises. Funded by the William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia Cultural Fund, an artists' residency at the [Philadelphia School of Circus Arts](#), and donations from many generous individual and business donors, this aerial dance occurred the same weekend, and close to location, of the [Schuylkill River Arts Day](#), a lively, multi-part festival for all ages celebrating “the birthplace of Philadelphia, a continual natural resource, and a source of creative energy.” *Beck Epoch* is the culmination, to date, of Vidich's six years exploring, creating on, and bringing public attention to the Schuylkill.

On Saturday, when I attended, we were again thrown off balance by afternoon thunderstorms and not certain, until an hour before the show's start time, that it would proceed. Then, as others set up on folding chairs and blankets along the river's east bank, south of the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, those of us who had reserved and pre-paid for watercrafts scrambled aboard to paddle ourselves, or be paddled by others, through the Schuylkill's dark waters and await the start of the show.

The start was lovely: positioned close to the blue silks demarcating the bridge's arch that framed the performance, and having watched two pink-clad dancers and two black-clad technicians scramble up one of the arch struts to wait quietly high above the water, my eye was quietly drawn to a distant craft paddling from north of the bridge toward us. Two dancers, also in pink, variously stood, arched, swayed, stretched, reached, and curved through the space as they approached us, framed by the arch and silks. It was something like a moment from *Lord of the Rings*, inviting us to a world of myth and vision.

As the boat drew under the bridge, I realized that a trapeze hung between the silks; this became the focus of the work as one dancer harnessed herself to it and flipped, flowed, and flew between the blue fabrics. Eventually, the two high-up dancers began to descend toward the water, unfurling the flowing streamers on their arms, floating their reach further into the air. The moves, while clearly requiring strength and risk to perform, were much repeated and soon became familiar, diminishing my experience of enchantment, though not my pleasure in the overall scene. Reaching the water level, the performers joined the dancer on the trapeze to form aerial hieroglyphs of floating, dipping, spraying, and posing between sea and air. The boat reappeared, to carry three of the dancers off, leaving one behind to submerge herself (bravely, I thought) in the Schuylkill's dark waters and swim to the bridge's pylon, disappearing—as had the boat—behind it.

Midway through the performance, the sounding of train horns accompanied the otherwise blaring, wall-paperish music, and drizzling rain reminded us of the precariousness of this performance, of the river's condition between nature and the machinery of modern life, of our lives in this moment, bobbing on the river, and always.

[Beck Epoch](#), An Aerial River Dance, Strawberry Mansion Bridge, Fairmont Park. July 15-16.

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