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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Dorrance Dance and a Mythili Prakash Premiere at Jacob's Pillow

Stormy weather at a summer festival wraps performances of a debut and some classic works by two very distinct choreographers.



From left, Gregory Richardson and Luke Hickey in "SOUNDspace," being performed by Dorrance Dance at the Jacob's Pillow festival in Becket, Mass. Credit...Christopher Duggan



By [Brian Seibert](#)

Reporting from Becket, Mass.

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Rain was in the forecast here at the [Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival](#) on Friday, but the first rumble came from inside the Ted Shawn Theater. It was partway through the matinee performance of Dorrance Dance and the lights were dimmed. The dancers had spread themselves around the auditorium and were drumming the floor and walls, working up a storm in surround sound.

Converting the whole theater into a drum is a familiar and fun move for this tap dance company, led by Michelle Dorrance. They've even [done it at the Guggenheim Museum](#). But the true glory of "SOUNDspace," the first of two works on the group's Pillow program, is how quiet it is.

The work, performed mostly without musical accompaniment, was [created 10 years ago for Danspace Project](#) at the East Village landmark of St. Mark's Church, where the wooden floor was off limits for metal-tipped shoes. Dorrance's solution was to tap without taps, in leather-soled footwear or socks. Although "SOUNDspace" has changed in the years since, adapting to less restrictive spaces, some sections are still performed tap-less. Rhythms in leather and wood can sound beautifully like billiard balls caroming.

But even when the dancers wear tap shoes, their foot-drumming stays wonderfully subtle, expressive with timbre and touch. Dorrance's choreography helps draw attention to those subtleties, isolating swiveling ankles and knees. For long swathes, she maintains suspense with a kind of danced click track, a ticking like a stopwatch or a bomb which the dancers rhythmically embroider. Then they scuttle across the stage like crabs, back and forth, playfully adding and subtracting dancers, trading phrases that please one another.

This uncommon compositional skill — sustained for nearly an hour, combining set choreography with improvisation, gathering tap dancers into a cohesive group without sacrificing individuality — is what made "SOUNDspace" so exciting in 2013, only two years after Dorrance Dance was formed. Ten years on, the piece holds up, both as a reminder of early promise and as proof of longevity.

Besides Dorrance, only one dancer from the original cast (the self-effacingly excellent Claudia Rahardjanoto) performed on Friday. The new dancers (the newest, Dylan Szuch, making his debut this week) bring themselves to the work. Luke Hickey is the flashiest, thrillingly so and never unmusical. Leonardo Sandoval adds Brazilian rhythms and sounds to a body-percussion, one-man-band solo. Addi Loving, who joined the group this year, is quick-witted, superskilled, adorable and a little dorky — clearly one of this tribe.

Also on the program was Dorrance's newest work, "45th & 8th," which debuted at the Joyce Theater in December. It's a feature for [the stellar vocalist Aaron Marcellus](#), who composed the score and performs it as part of a four-piece band. There's a spot for Marcellus to show off his astonishing technique of looping his voice electronically, building a many-layered cake of soulful sound. But while the score starts and ends

funkily, its quiet-storm middle is slow and sticky, and the dance, sensitively following the music, sags. The dancers, sliding around, make a good time of it anyway.

The premiere of the day came later, in a separate evening program, when Mythili Prakash debuted “She’s Auspicious.” A second generation Indian and American expert in the Indian form Bharatanatyam, Prakash is steeped in tradition but questioning. She also works with the contemporary choreographer Akram Khan. Here she questions the mythology of the goddess Devi and societal expectations of femininity.



Mythili Prakash in “She’s Auspicious” at Jacob’s Pillow. Credit...Christopher Duggan

The work, largely a solo, is strongest when she uses Bharatanatyam technique subversively. An adept Bharatanatyam dancer can switch among multiple characters during a solo with clarity and total composure. Prakash has that skill but ditches the composure. Her goddess or woman, trying to be seductive one moment and a mother the next, shows the strain and freaks out. When she’s bouncing and rocking an invisible infant, you fear that she might shake it to death.

The work grows even stronger when Prakash is joined by three musicians — all of them women, a rarity in Indian dance. What starts out looking like a traditional solo morphs into a portrait of the goddess as a frazzled multitasker: pulled this way and that by invisible children, cleaning their messes, tending their wounds, cooking their meals, all while primping for a public appearance. Now you fear she might shake herself to pieces.

This is effectively ironic, though the tone is self-serious rather than comic, which seems like a missed opportunity. What comes before and after is protracted and harder to

follow. Near the beginning, Prakash introduces some of her themes with personal reminiscences in clunky voice-over. Near the end, she removes her jewelry and lets down her hair, apparently seeking freedom in greater ferocity, only to finish in exhaustion, spasming on the floor then rising to look each audience member in the eye, as if she has established a more honest self-presentation.

She has, but the work feels like it's still in development. Scheduled for the Pillow's outdoor stage but moved inside to a studio theater because of the weather, it seems to need fancier production values, especially sophisticated lighting, along with some editing. On Friday, just as it was coming to a drawn-out close, it got an assist from nature. The heavens opened and the glass-walled studio shook with divine thunder.

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