

EZRA DICKINSON DANCES A DUET WITH SEATTLE

Written By Rosalie Anne Cabison: May 22, 2013

On the 800 block of Stewart St. in downtown Seattle, people gathered around a sandwich board advertising Ezra Dickinson's performance of 'Mother for you I made this.' No theater, no seats, only an assortment of Seattleites wearing headphones on a sidewalk. Something unique was about to happen.

'Mother for you I made this' is the culmination of seven years of work. "I started making short solos for my schizophrenic mother about 7 years ago," Dickinson said. "Velocity Dance Center and Tonya Lockyear have basically commissioned this work to be created and presented to the city of Seattle." His use of the word 'work' is very specific. It is not a 'show' because the word 'show' evokes images of a stage where audiences sit and watch passively. Dickinson did not put on a show so much as a total experience. The work is described as a 'performed audio tour' around the streets of downtown Seattle. A mixture of music, ambient noise and spoken word was broadcasted from a bearded man's backpack while ushers herded the group through the streets and watched for traffic.

Dickinson starts in front of the Greyhound station across the street and danced along the sidewalk and in front of various buildings in Seattle. His leaps, steps and body lines were so natural and graceful that if not for Dickinson's charisma, one might have forgotten to pay attention to his movement. It is effortless as a result of years of training. In an unexpected turn, the side of a parking garage becomes a screen for a projector and the experience becomes a multimedia performance. Dickinson even manages to change costumes and become different characters.

With Seattle as a stage, commanding the attention of an audience is a feat. A dance can be choreographed but it is impossible to choreograph the bustle of a city. Distractions are readily available but Dickinson doesn't compete. He calls the performance a collection of solo pieces but they are more like duets. His dance partner? The city. Buses and bicyclists sped by to obstruct viewing and add a sense of spontaneity. Parked cars and pedestrians formed a living set and even the wait for crosswalk lights to change became part of the dance.

Passersby occasionally stopped, curious about the peculiar man dancing in the street and Dickinson's lack of inhibition is apparent. A lack of inhibition is part of what makes someone a dancer: "I think anyone can call themselves a dancer ... I think it's one of the most natural things that us as humans have. We've probably been doing it longer than anything else other than breathing, eating, sleeping. I think this idea that one is or isn't a dancer isn't really so much of a question to me. It's more about just giving yourself the permission to feel movement and feel yourself."

There is another thing that distracts from Dickinson's dance and that is the message of the piece. Dance ceases to be steps in time to music and becomes a translation of Dickinson's

feelings for the audience. It is an expression of a son's feelings towards his schizophrenic mother, but it takes on a life as an expression of activism advocating improved care for mental illness. "I have known what it's like to feel alone on this subject but as I've made this piece and moved forward I have realized that there is a community of people that have shared this same feeling ... by making this work I've been confronted with this voice of the community that has come behind me and that's almost raised up and has rejoiced in the fact that I can speak about this and that I've given permission to others to speak about this."

The experience ended with Freeway Park as a theater, the audience watching from the benches. After applause, tears and sniffing are apparent as audience members hand back their headphones.