

Ezra Dickinson Quietly Provokes

Written by Karena Birk: May 9 2013



Ezra Dickinson in Mother for you I made this
Photo by Tim Summers

“Mother, can you live?” What does it mean for a son to have to ask this question? What does it mean for a mother that her son asks this question? Where was the societal safety net that could have prevented this question?

By the end of Ezra Dickinson’s *Mother for you I made this*, when this question is one of many similarly unsettling ones on the soundscore, the emotional impact of his quiet, subtle work comes roaring in. The program notes that the solo is about “Dickinson’s relationship with his mother, a dance teacher with schizophrenia who called him up 10 years ago to tell him she was living on the street” and is meant to activate “conversation about America’s failed mental health care system.” Too often, advocacy art can founder under a burden of sincerity and of forcing a message on an audience, and Dickinson is to be commended for the space he gave his subject to breathe. Through quiet and restraint, he created a deeply moving and effective piece. Dickinson’s work, part of Velocity Dance Center’s *Made in Seattle* series, takes place on the streets and alleys of downtown Seattle, starting outside the dreary Greyhound bus station, and

progressing through various usually-ignored pockets of space. Twenty people gather, don headphones, and are guided by ushers from site to site as city life flows around and through the performance.



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It opens with Dickinson across the street, dramatically framed by a doorway, carving shapes in space, and then ranging up and down the sidewalk with expansive jumps and elegant arabesques. The visual interest of his dancing is heightened as passing cars and buses interrupt the view, making one anxious for what might have been missed. Eventually his movement quiets, and he slowly makes his way to a group of trees down the street. Bent over, shuffling, no trace remaining of the virtuosic, regal dancer he was a moment ago, he weaves a strip of cloth between the trees. Words on the cloth unfurl into sentences like “who will make a home for my mother who lives with imbalance,” “look at me mother,” and “I love you mother.” After a film interlude in an alley, Dickinson emerges in a mask (presumably) depicting his mother, his bowed shoulders covered with a blanket printed with the same face. Slowly, seemingly aimlessly, he wanders, leading his audience eventually to a small park-like area below street level. His mask is exchanged for a brilliant blue lizard-like head, and eventually Dickinson re-emerges, his simple movements becoming more dance-y, until the dialogue in the soundscore drives him to hide under a blanket. The piece over, he has no curtain or backstage to retreat to. The moment when he emerges from the blanket, looking a little shocked and vulnerable, is one of the most poignant moments of the piece. The sudden return to the “real world” is a surprise to the audience too, as the import of what they have journeyed through together starts to be felt.

Site-specific work in public always creates a fascinating dynamic of both the performance itself, and the friction of interaction between the performance and the public. In Mother, that friction is brilliantly topical. As the performance brings up issues of mental illness, the setting of the performance makes one constantly aware of the tension between “normal” and “abnormal” public behavior. Normally, one does not curve one’s body into baroque shapes on the sidewalk,

or do balancés while waiting at the crosswalk. The reaction of people walking by makes clear how transgressive Dickinson's public dancing is. By extension, his paying audience, in accepting his actions, shares in his transgression. By being part of abnormal public behavior, they enact behavior that is usually viewed as a signifier of mental illness.



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Dickinson does not force his subject matter on his audience, but gives enough time and breath to let the audience consider, process, and come to his subject matter. By letting the impact mental illness had on a mother-son relationship slowly sink in, Dickinson makes the audience viscerally aware of what is at stake in the debate of how much society is obligated to take care of its own. He makes it hard to believe that the obligation has been met, when one considers a boy pleading, "Mother, can you live?"