

Ezra Dickinson: Triumph and Tribute

Written by RACHEL GALLAHER May 9 2013



Ezra Dickinson is known for his beautiful, inventive choreography, as well as his innovative “[slow walks](#)” through various parts of the city. In his current performance, *Mother for you I made this*, Dickinson takes his choreography outside, creating one-of-a-kind site-specific solos that expose his relationship with his mother, a dance teacher with schizophrenia, and open up the often-ignored subject of the American healthcare system and its failure to support those suffering from mental illness. Using the medium that he knows best, Dickinson exposes his vulnerability, descending from confident dancer to broken child, exploring the years in between, and giving the most beautiful and emotionally wrenching dance performance I’ve seen all year.

Starting on Stewart Street in front of the Greyhound Station, Dickinson begins with fluid, balletic motion—port de bras, jetés, assembles—full of graceful, fluid arms and leaps. The “audience,” who in a sense is part of the work, follows Dickinson, each person with a set of headphones listening to music composed by Dickinson’s long-time collaborator Pauri Walsh, as well as a

monologue of various phrases and memories (“As a child I was your task,” “In my dreams we are at the ocean shore.”). Like a piper in low-top tennis shoes and plaid golf pants, he leads the spectators—people on the sidewalk stop and watch, and one young man joins in with some hip-hop moves. Dickinson doesn’t rush. He’s purposeful as he moves down the sidewalk, physically expressing his emotions, tying together both his mother and himself through dance.

The group reaches a small area of birch trees in front of the US Courthouse—an apt background given his criticism of the US mental healthcare system. Here he produces a long, white banner, rolling it out from inside his clothes, meticulously weaving it in a square pattern around the trees. It has phrases written on it: “MY MOTHER HAS WET THE BED SHE WAS PUT IN,” and “HOW CAN WE SOOTHE OUR COUNTRY’S NEGLECT?” He’s making a statement. He is unraveling his soul.

As he continues to lead the group, Dickinson integrates video (a piece that shows him overwhelmed by various incarnations of himself, perhaps mirroring the difficulty of trying to understand his mother’s experiences) and costuming into the work—one particularly terribly and haunting mask produces feelings of uncomfortable repulsion we often get when confronted with those who are different than us, the homeless wandering the streets (as Dickinson’s mother once did) and the mentally ill.

The last stop is a sunken park behind the Olive 8 building. Here Dickinson dons a bright dinosaur head and works his way down the stairs, lunging gracefully with arms hooked into claws—an adult interpretation of a childhood game. Here the monologue in the headsets descends into past experiences: his mother hitting him, yelling at him, forgetting to make dinner, demeaning her little boy. By this point in the performance several people were crying. Ending on a poignant note, he curls up on the ground, covering himself with a child’s blanket, and the single phrase, “Mother can I hide with you?” reverberates through the headphones. Silence. Applause.

What makes this performance so powerful?

Yes it’s the dancing, the atmosphere, the feeling that we are a part of the show, the strangeness of watching dance occur against the background of a city that always carries on. But also it’s the precision and frankness with which Dickinson performs. He’s not asking for sympathy; he does not feel sorry for himself. This is his mother and the story of their relationship. It is sad and beautiful and full of emotion, but above all it shows the power of love and family, and forgiveness. Dickinson is not bitter. He’s a human who reflects, acknowledges and above all, loves his mother.