

Dancing Down the Walls

**Zaccho Dance Theater, "Inverted States"
In the Street Festival
Choreography by Joanna Haigood
On the side of the Senator Hotel, Ellis Street, San Francisco
October 8, 2005**

by Paul Parish
copyright ©2005 by Paul Parish



There are many explanations as to why San Francisco's Skid Row is called "the Tenderloin." My favorite, which comes from a former aide to Mayor Alioto, is that it's policeman's jargon: "a cop could live year-round on tenderloin steak from the kickbacks he'd get from all the shady businesses that needed protection." The Tenderloin is certainly placed in the ideal location for a vice zone, halfway between the financial district and the executives' homes in Pacific Heights, just north of Market.

It's still our sketchiest neighborhood downtown, and you have to look alive, even in broad daylight, if you venture up to the "In the Street Festival," which took place (as it has for the last decade or so) on a Saturday afternoon in the Fall in the Tenderloin. This year it was on a bracingly windy, clear bright afternoon, and a good-sized crowd filled Cohen Alley, which is looking decidedly prosperous as the 509 Community Center has continued to thrive on its east side. The Senator Hotel (five or six storeys high), which faces the alley on the west, has suffered a first class makeover, with polychrome detailing of its many bay windows and a handsome stripe of pottery decorations running up the middle of its long side. Cohen Alley itself was covered with a rug of sod turf (on which the SF Butoh group "Inkboat" was going to perform later). This green sward extended a good fifty feet back into the block, and while on-lookers milled about waiting for performances to begin, a DJ with a big set-up played hip-hop good and loud; there was a certain amount of stylish non-professional dancing going on from men who looked pretty local.

At roughly 3:30 PM the music changed to old-fashioned American military-band sounds, distorted (played backwards, in fact, in a sound collage by Walter Kitundu) but distinctly recognizable as the sonority that accompanies political campaigning. And thereupon George and Laura Bush appeared on the roof of the Senator Hotel, leaned towards us, and took a few lunging strides down the side of the building and began to greet their adoring supporters. These imposters were dance-aerialists, of course, suspended on black ropes anchored to the roof. They were Christopher Love and Sonya Smith, members of Zaccho Dance Company, whose director Joanna Haigood has just returned from a couple of well-publicized gigs in New York City (the DUMBO festival, and a run at City Center) to liven things up a bit here.

Haigood specializes in staying calm amidst giddy aesthetic states. She herself has become famous for site-specific work, especially hanging off the clock of the SF Ferry Building—but she's also done a dance inside a hive of bees and another on a trapeze to songs of Edith Piaf. (She dances it herself, but as "Dance for Y'all," it's entered the repertory of the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago and has been seen by large audiences around the world.) Whatever it is Haigood is doing, the tone of the piece is doing something ELSE; more than most around here, Haigood makes dances that take you somewhere emotionally.

It's quite a feeling, I must say, to find yourself looking up sideways at caricatures of people as famous and widely despised as the Bushes are around SF, and specifically in the Tenderloin (where the main businesses seem to be social services and drug dealing). Only a few moments before, at least four fire trucks had come, sirens blaring, right up to the edge of the site. And lo! And behold! there's Dubya spreading his feet wide and putting both thumbs up and grinning at us like billy-ho, while Laura strikes a winning pose a few feet behind him. Not to mention that it was Blue Angels week in San Francisco. Several times during the performance the unbelievable noise of crack fighter jets split the skies, and dazzling blue-and-silver aircraft flew right overhead hot-dogging each other— which seemed always to set off the pigeons, who flew out of the alley in the opposite direction every time, right over our heads. It really was a happening, just much more entertaining than happenings usually are.

The presidential pair took about 15 minutes to make it down the façade of the hotel. They paused to pose many times: we saw the "thumbs-up" many times over, also the "I just finished my triple somersault on the high trapeze" pose of triumph (en face, en effacé, and croisc). These were followed by some dancing off the wall, including small jumps that bounced off the wall and built up into gorgeous 360-degree barrel turns that sailed around in slow motion, ending in the "thumbs-up" pose.

Finally, a balloon-globe of the Earth got thrown off the roof, which Dubya caught and tossed around hopefully in a clear echo of Chaplin's sublime dance with the globe in "The Great Dictator": Love actually looked more like Donald Trump than anything else during this sequence, which was deliberately awkward and embarrassing and ended up with him squeezing most of the air out of the globe and trying to stuff it inside his suit-jacket pocket and not really succeeding. It wasn't a mistake, that's what they intended, and soon the dance was over and we were able to cheer and deal with all the things that come up when you're at an outdoor performance. It was getting cold, and though I wanted to stay for Inkboat, it was just getting to be time to leave. I saw a little bit, and Inkboat are clearly gifted - the effect was kind of Cremaster-ish, geeky repetitive flattened-affect takes on urban alienation. A woman all in white (they were all in white) sang most of "Voi che sapeté," not very well—but then she was a dancer wasn't she? They CAN move—especially a shaved-headed skinny white guy, whose control in the midst of convulsions and convulsions (in the midst of which a perfect slow pirouette would open like a flower) was especially impressive— especially since he did it in sneakers on grass.

DanceView Times

What's On This Week

Index of Writers

Back Issues

About Us

Links

DanceView

Writers

Mindy Aloff
Dale Brauner
Mary Cargill
Christopher Correa
Clare Croft
Nancy Dalva
Rita Felciano
Marc Haegeman
George Jackson
Eva Kistrup
Gia Kourlas
Alan M. Kriegsman
Sali Ann Kriegsman
Sandi Kurtz
Alexander Meinertz
Gay Morris
Ann Murphy
Paul Parish
John Percival
Tom Phillips
Naima Prevots
Susan Reiter
Lisa Rinehart
Jane Simpson
Alexandra Tomalonis (Editor)
Lisa Traiger
Kathrine Sorley Walker
Leigh Witchel
David Vaughan

One could make a long list of dancers who make political art in or from San Francisco, starting with Isadora Duncan. Foremost among these here now would be Krissy Keefer, of Dance Brigade, who co-founded the Gay and Lesbian Dance Festival and the Furious Feet Dance Festival (which is explicitly devoted to "dance as an instrument in the struggle"). But also firmly established modern dancers such as Margaret Jenkins have made explicitly political dances, and Brenda Way of ODC is increasingly taking up social issues (most recently, global warming). All of Joe Goode's work is subversive, though there's been nothing truly explosive since "29 Effeminate Gestures." Keith Hennessy (of Contraband, then CORE, then Circo Zero) and Jesselito Bie of Steamroller have taken their work to the streets in very confrontational ways. Pearl Ubungen, whose shows were political autos da fe, worked always in the street. Michael Smuin's "Song for Dead Warriors" needs mention, not just because it was done in the Opera House by SFB. Sue Roginski and Sean Dorsey are making same-sex duets with implications that go on and on, inward into the difficulties of modern love, outward into the breakdown of community, that are among the most profound dances to be seen around here.

And this is just a short list off the top of my head.

For more information on the three-day "In the Street" festival, visit its co-sponsor's web-site, www.luggagestoregallery.org

Volume 3, No. 37
October 10, 2005
copyright ©2005 Paul Parish
www.danceviewtimes.com