

THE DANCE ENTHUSIAST

IMPRESSIONS OF: JANE COMFORT'S "ALTIPLANO"



By Robert Johnson

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Jane Comfort's Dancers/ Photo by Jinyoul Lim

Jane Comfort and Company in "Altiplano"
The Ellen Stewart Theatre at La MaMa ETC, New York City
Conception and Direction: Jane Comfort
Choreography: Jane Comfort and Company
Music and Sound Design: Brandon Wolcott
Lighting Design: Joe Levasseur
Costumes: Liz Prince
Performers: Ellen Smith Ahern, Leslie Cuyjet, Sean Donovan, Petra van Noort, Javier Perez, Gabrielle Revlock and Darrin Wright

Humanity can get so puffed up. Sometimes we need a dance to remind us we are part of nature.

Jane Comfort's "Altiplano" does the trick, although this hour-long work, which received its premiere on May 28, as part of the La MaMa Moves! Festival, is so seductive and so cunningly made there's no chance of lapsing into brutishness.

Some parts of this mysterious piece suggest the animals whose lives and routines lie hidden from our awareness in the remote stretches of the Andean plateau. Sean Donovan enters "walking" on his hands and dragging his legs

behind him. He seems to be looking for something, eyes darting around an invisible landscape, but, for reasons we can't fathom, he abruptly decides to exit. Later Donovan finds Leslie Cuyjet, and they sniff and inspect each other, quivering with excitement, tentatively stretching and then hurriedly pulling back. They don't couple the first time they meet. In fact, they conduct this attenuated mating ritual---if that's what it is---with an air of uncertainty and a concern for details that we can't begin to comprehend. Having taught her dancers to speak an alien movement language, Comfort reminds us that the natural world has no desire to satisfy our prurient curiosity and does not run according to our schedules.



Gabrielle Revlock, Darrin Wright, Ellen Smith Ahern, Petra van Noort, Leslie Cuyjet; Photo by Jinyou Lim

Yet we can't help but identify with these characters, who, after all, are still half-human. We even identify with the odd creatures—dancers sitting on the floor and holding their feet---who advance wriggling in a direction revealed to them by the moon's location in the sky. Though we can't guess the purpose of this migration, we, too, can fall under the spell of the giant orb's luminosity. And we can respect the doggedness with which the creatures resume their journey, after a startling explosion knocks them on their backs.

Liz Prince has clothed the dancers in simple togs shaded purple and brown, and overlaid with patches like silvery bark. Without recourse to padding or "Lion King" makeup, Comfort achieves an imaginative metamorphosis like the ones described by Ovid. Suddenly a dancer's crooked limbs begin to resemble a tree, and a recumbent body suggests a boulder covered with moss. Javier Perez's athleticism and his coarse, half-spoken cries have a wildness to them, and we are happy to meet Comfort's fantasy half way.



Ellen Smith Ahern, Petra van Noort, Darrin Wright, Sean Donovan, Javier Perez, Leslie Cuyjet; Photo by Jinyoul Lim

Yet "Altiplano" is still a formal composition, beautifully arranged. The casualness of moments when dancers drop like ripe fruit, slapping the floor, contrasts with sections when they move in counterpoint with their energy contained and their limbs neatly folded. In Brandon Wolcott's sound-score, too, seemingly random scraping and chirping noises give way to the structure of a salsa rhythm. Comfort has arranged a spectacular finale, with the dancers standing in a line across the far end of the space and watching us (silently calling to us?) through a curtain of rain. Yet the dancing is also symmetrically contained between two solos by Petra Van Noort, who begins and ends "Altiplano" wiping her hand across her mouth, pressing down along her neck and chest, embracing herself and pointing to her surroundings with her index finger. Exploring her own orifice and contours, she seems to discover the natural world within her body; and with the force of a sudden realization she is sucked backward into darkness.