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MARCH 16, 2015

A RITE AS IT EXISTS NOW - A GUEST BLOG POST BY JEREMY HALE

by Spot LA

"'Rite of Spring' exists, inextricably, in a historical context; our relationship to it in time places us closer to its ending than to its beginning" - Leon Ingulsrud (paraphrased)

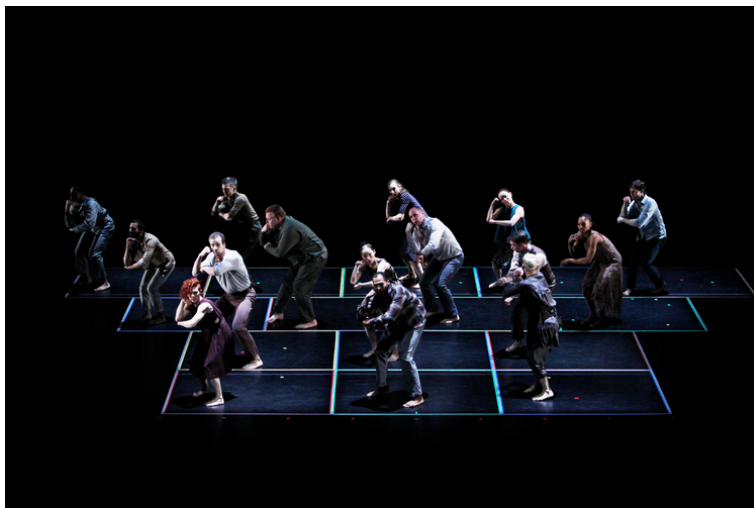


Photo Credit Paul B. Goode

Entering the theater, the curtain is already up, haze billowing out into the space.



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The show begins at the end. The iconic "dance to death" which comes at the end of Rite of Spring is thrust upon us at the very beginning, with no context or development leading to it. On the contrary this exhausting finale *is* the context. Rite of Spring's finale - including the riots it sparked at its premiere in Paris a hundred years ago - are indeed part of the context in which we, today, experience the work. After the finale, it's back to the intro, back to the familiar, sort of.

The show progresses through most of the first act in a familiar way. Familiar movement patterns, familiar music, familiar staging. It's comfortable; we've been here before. A few subtle reminders waft through these early sections - actor Will Bond plays the famous introduction of Stravinsky's score on a tiny radio, wearing military fatigues (another subtle visual reminder of the world that was outside the Paris theater in 1913 - World War 1) - but mostly, it's familiar, nostalgic - nostalgia without memory.

Slowly this familiar form begins to dissolve. Just as the original Rite of Spring disrupted standards of composition and made many audiences uncomfortable - our comfort is slowly disrupted as the familiar becomes distorted and contorted. Time is discussed, played with, mocked. Up becomes down, forward becomes left - sometimes literally, as performer Akiko Aizawa walks along on chairs that are placed sequentially at her feet by the other performers - at first right side up then held aloft, sideways, or upside down, as if walking in zero gravity and up and down were irrelevant. If up and down are irrelevant, what about then and now? Repetition comes at unexpected times, at once throwing us the life raft of familiarity and motif as much as destroying flow and making us question the reality of the repeated element. Is it really familiar? Or do we only think it's familiar?

As the structure peels further open, *A Rite* begins to expand beyond its own place in history and we are exposed to more of the elements between us and the century-old work. In the midst of the show, the performers begin to have a Q&A session that quickly dissolves into fights and name-calling. Sections of the score are remastered in a big band style, then a lindy style and we see dancing reminiscent of vaudeville and minstrelsy - reminders of the relationship of the original piece to the history of colonial artistic appropriation. And through all this we hear excerpts of Severine Neff's brilliant - and hilarious - analysis of Rite of Spring performed by Ellen Lauren. Further adding to the context within context in which *A Rite* exists. Part of watching Rite of Spring now is to view it in the context of a world where the work has been discussed at length for a hundred years. No art takes place in a vacuum, certainly, but "*A Rite*" is especially dense and crowded with context. If art is essentially about manipulating context to create an experience, this is art at the highest order.



Company and SIT Company masterfully avoided this trap by attacking *not* the piece as it was a hundred years ago, but the piece as it exists *now* - with all of its historical significance, all its Eurocentric self-importance, all its influence, all its staleness, all its nostalgia. Rather than adding to a long list of attempts at reinterpreting Rite of Spring, "*A Rite*" manages to not simply exist in the context of Rite of Spring but to create an entirely new context in which Rite of Spring exists. In so doing, they have contributed a significant, important, and exquisite work of art to the landscape of performance.

*Jeremy Hale is a professional dancer in the Los Angeles area.



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