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Arts & Entertainment

At REDCAT, Rosanna Gamson Dances in a Dream State

By Emily Manthei May 31, 2016



The Rosanna Gamson/World Wide company returns to REDCAT with the two-act dance/theater hybrid Still/Restless. There are three performances on Thursday-Saturday, June 2-4

photo by Kailai Chen

DTLA - Where do creative collaborations with Lithuanian improvisers, Mexican dancers and martial artists begin? At the neighborhood copy shop, of course.

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In the late 1980s, when Rosanna Gamson was a young dancer in New York City, she stood in the copy line behind a man with the word “Worldwide” written on his business card. She decided it would be a good name for her fledgling company.

Fast forward nearly three decades and the moniker couldn’t be more fitting. The Rosanna Gamson/World Wide company, which has been based in Los Angeles since 2000, features dancers with a variety of backgrounds, from ballet to tap to tango to flamenco. Her ideas often spring from the cultural fabric of the city.

“I ended up doing a project in Poland that was inspired by seeing amazing Polish theater work here in Los Angeles,” she said recently by phone.

This week, Gamson unveils her latest dance/theater hybrid, with three performances of the two-act Still/Restless on Thursday-Saturday, June 2-4, at the REDCAT theater in the back of Walt Disney Concert Hall. Intriguingly, the show is propelled not just by movement, but by Gamson’s studies of dream states and neuroscience.

The current show expands on a short piece Gamson staged in 2014 at REDCAT’s New Original Works (or NOW) Festival. She recalls being inspired by seeing a Lithuanian dancer and actor named Petras Lisauskas improvise a dance at the Polish festival.

Gamson marveled at the way that Lisauskas and other top improv performers can essentially turn off the part of the brain that serves as an “inhibitor.”

“Then, they’re in a zone where everything they do is right, but they’re not exactly deciding it,” she said. “So I had the question: Is there a parallel between being able to hit that groove in improv, and in dreaming?”

As she worked on finding the answer to that question and turning it into a performance, Gamson consulted with scientists who were doing sleep studies. She said it led to some interesting conversations, but not exactly any big answers.

“I can’t say I know anything for sure now,” she admits. “But I did develop a series of improv games that are performed as part of the piece. So somehow, there was a payoff for it all.”

Return to REDCAT

This week's show marks Gamson's third main-stage production at REDCAT, in addition to two NOW Festival appearances. She has found a fan and partner in venue Executive Director Mark Murphy, who first saw one of her sold-out shows at the Japan America Theatre in Little Tokyo in 2002.

"I was very impressed with the intelligence and theatricality, and the great attention to stagecraft and detail," Murphy recalled.

Gamson's first appearance at REDCAT came in 2005 with *Aura*, a show co-produced by a theater company in Mexico City. It examined the idea of borders, and touched on the themes of intimacy and isolation. Five years later she returned to the venue to premiere *Tov*, a project she developed with Polish and American artists. It centered on the re-creation of an extinct species of Eurasian horse.

While *Still/Restless* springboards from the idea of dreams and neuroscience, there is no through-line narrative. In the first act, eight dancers perform amid shadows and light on a stage draped with black silks. They are lit from behind for transparency or in front for opacity. The goal, said Gamson, is to create a layered effect that guides the viewer's eye throughout the performance.

In the second act, bright colors are added to a white backdrop, as the performers run through a series of dynamic duets. The entire show runs 90 minutes.

Although the movements are mostly choreographed, the dream concept remains steady — Gamson said improv prompts give the dancers imaginative ideas that allow them to make choices.

"It's like seeing two sides of consciousness," Murphy said. "You can see that they're listening to themselves and each other in a very unique way."

Other ideas also propel the show. Gamson said that while she was developing *Still/Restless*, she was dealing with two personal tragedies: the death of a close friend's son, and another friend who succumbed to ALS. She said the deaths created a link between dreaming and mortality. The metaphor is employed in the show.

"This year has been very dark for me, and that crept into the piece," Gamson said. "I want the audience to ask, how do you carry the people that you've lost on with you? How can we be more tender with each other?"

She continued, “I guess the outcome I would like best is if everybody left the theater and realized we should hold each other closer because we’re not going to be here forever.”

Still/Restless runs Thursday-Saturday, June 2-4, at REDCAT, 631 W. Second St., (213) 237-2800 or redcat.org.

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