



February 20, 2009

we become by LAVA

By Sarah Hart

"we become," by the Brooklyn-based Movement Ensemble LAVA, founded and directed by Sarah East Johnson, is utterly unique and utterly beguiling. Its charm comes from a perfect balance between high sophistication in certain elements and an accessible, almost amateurish, feel in others.

Artist Nancy Brooks Brody provides the backdrop—an convergence of small bits of silver into a mesmerizing arrangement against a dark blue background. In the unadorned, barn-basement atmosphere of the Brooklyn Lyceum in Park Slope, her installation is strikingly precise and elegant. The music for "we become" is by smoky-voiced Toshi Reagon. It ranges from ethereal to R&B to country, and is equally flawless.

Into that mix LAVA's six women dancers, dressed in the colors of the rainbow, come running, cartwheeling, sliding, balancing on one another, and handstanding. LAVA's signature style is the combination of dance with acrobatics and other sport-like moves. But it is not the unusualness of their movements, nor, frankly, the skill of their execution, that make this piece remarkable. In fact, the range of moves is fairly limited and in this theater's close quarters the audience sees every shake of an overstrained muscle and every slight adjustment made to preserve balance.

But, we also see the individuality of each performer. We see their facial expressions and can almost feel their intakes of breath before plunging into a difficult move. The effect is to endear us to each one personally. Even the costumes, mixes and matches that appear to have been hand selected at the thrift stores of each dancer's preference, seem to bespeak their individual personalities. There's a whiff of talent show to this performance and watching it would be engrossing for the sheer fact that one roots for each dancer's success.

The reason it all works so well, however, is the beautiful interactions among the dancers themselves. They look at and smile at one another, rather than at the audience. We see their slight communications as they coordinate collaborative moves and moments of improvisation. These kindly intimacies give the piece a wonderfully fresh, spontaneous, feel.

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"we become" is definitely strongest in its duets and group dance sections where nearly every move involves the dancers pushing, pulling, supporting and counterbalancing one another. Especially beautiful is a trapeze piece performed by Lollo, Diana Y Greiner, and Molly Chanoff. Their limbs tangle and untangle and, as with the other multi-dancer sections, most of their moves would be impossible to execute alone. In the few solo performances the dancers seem to have a limited vocabulary.

"we become" was, according to the press release, intended as an exploration of "neighborhood and the delicate balance of harmony and revolution, separatism and integration." I am not sure I picked up on all that, but it certainly left me with impression that beauty is created in numbers, in variety, and in interaction.

