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August 15, 2018

## → “Paramodernities” at Jacob’s Pillow

**“Paramodernities”**  
**Netta Yerushalmy**  
**Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival**  
**Jacob’s Pillow, MA**  
**August 11, 2018**

by **Gay Morris**  
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Netta Yerushalmy’s “Paramodernities,” presented at Jacob’s Pillow on Saturday, is a hugely ambitious work, a three-and-a-half-hour marathon of what the Pillow billed as a deconstruction and re-examination of

works by six major modernist choreographers: Vaslav Nijinsky, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Bob Fosse, and George Balanchine. Taking on any one of these artists would be challenging, dealing with six seems a little mad. Yet Yerushalmy has done it with stunning success. Usually her programs include just three of the choreographers. Saturday was the first time she showed all six together, making it a Jacob’s Pillow world premiere.

“Para” as a prefix has a variety of meanings, from beside and beyond to ancillary and extra, which is a good indication of the breadth of “Paramodernities.” Each of the six sections is an independent entity, yet there are elements that connect them. To begin with, in each instance Yerushalmy invited an academic or writer to contribute an essay, which he or she reads on stage, while dancers perform choreography Yerushalmy has created based on movement drawn from a work by one of the six choreographers. For example, in the Graham section (“Paramodernities #2”) art historian Carol Ockman read her text while Yerushalmy and Taryn Griggs performed Yerushalmy’s dances, which used vocabulary from Graham’s “Night Journey.”

Again, using the Graham section as an example, the dancers and reader often interrupted each other, and physically invaded each other’s territory (at one point the dancers were crawling over Ockman). Or the reader became a dancer (Ockman began her part by falling off a chair onto the floor, and later tried out a few steps at one side of the stage). While all this was going on, Ockman was reading a text that discussed Jocasta, the protagonist of “Night Journey,” in the context of Graham’s place as a woman in mid-century American society and of later feminist theory.

Each choreographer’s work was approached differently but each included a reader and one or more dancers and in every case the choreography was Yerushalmy’s. It should be added that with one brief exception, there was no music accompaniment and certainly no music from the works being considered. Also, the readers, although mostly academics, were not generally experts in the work of the choreographers they were dealing with. On the other hand, many did not focus on the particular work the dancers were referencing, but on broader issues of modernism that the dance evoked. The dancers were never from the companies of the choreographers whose steps they were dancing, although they were sometimes dancers from other major companies. For example, Marc Croussillat, who danced in the sections on Nijinsky and Cunningham, is a member of the Tricia Brown Company. On the other hand, Griggs, dancing in the Graham section, is a Pilates instructor with a dance background, and Magdalena Jarkowicz, who danced in the Balanchine section, is a costume designer (she designed the colorful costumes for “Paramodernities”), who clearly has had considerable ballet training.

The performance began with “Paramodernities #1” which dealt with Nijinsky and “The Rite of Spring.” While Croussillat danced Yerushalmy’s choreography derived from steps and gestures from Millicent Hodson’s well-known reconstruction of the ballet, philosopher David Kishik sat at a table, turning on and off a tape recorder that played a recording of another person reading Kishik’s text about the sacrificial body of the dancer. Sometimes Kishik interrupted the recorded commentary with live comments, enlarging on his original remarks. The sacrificial dancer’s body was here represented by both Nijinsky and the sacrificial maiden at the center of “The Rite of Spring,” but it is also a famous trope in its own right, found not only in many books and films but as a much referenced example of Michel Foucault’s disciplined body. Kishik spoke of the body in terms of the birth of the modern nation state and the body politic, where the body of the people is sacrificed for the nation, or national power. This section had the least interaction between reader and dancer, but the dancing part is usually taken by Yerushalmy, so the dynamic may be different when these two perform it.

Next was the Graham section, “Paramodernities #2,” then “Paramodernities #4,” which dealt with a variety of works from the Cunningham repertory. Yerushalmy’s dances made with Cunningham movement



were performed by Croussillat and Brittany Engel-Adams, an Ailey trained dancer. Writer Claudia La Rocco often conversed informally with the dancers as she read her text, which included commenting playfully on the not-very-active vernacular movement she was executing, like sitting on the stage cross-legged, while her two colleagues were verbally tracking the complex and highly energetic movement they were doing. La Rocco’s text was supplemented by the Pillow’s archivist Norton Owen telling an anecdote about Cunningham’s early, and for thirty years only, appearance at the Pillow after enraging Ted Shawn with his avant-gardism. Conceptual artist Allana Clarke also contributed, reading her commentary from the audience. She questioned Cunningham’s use of abstraction, a key element of modernism that supposedly positioned art outside politics. Clarke contested the apolitical nature of abstraction, stating that everything is political, and “if I can’t divorce myself from the social, why should you?” Another memorable moment occurred when Croussillat, in the middle of executing Cunningham’s exacting steps, broke into pelvic movement as Getish Mamo’s Ethiopian pop song was heard. Seeing the flowing use of the pelvis was a shock in the midst of Cunningham’s centered, upright vocabulary. Suddenly one saw just how restricted Cunningham’s dance was, despite his interest in enlarging it through chance procedures.

Michael Blake, Joyce Edwards, Hsiao-Jou Tang and Megan Williams danced Yerushalmy’s choreography derived from Bob Fosse’s film, “Sweet Charity,” while dance historian Julia Foulkes read about the transactional nature of sex in his dances, and how, through them, commerce in the form of Broadway, films and television raised a seamier side of life to an acceptable level of taste. Foulkes roamed through the dancers as she spoke, merging with them in typical Fosse poses and making her points while the dancers sold themselves with the kind of over-the-top energy and faked smiles familiar to anyone who has ever seen a Broadway show.

The Balanchine segment (“Paramodernities #6”) was one of the most unusual and compelling. Who would imagine connecting this choreographer, let alone “Agon,” with disability and rehabilitation? Yerushalmy did, and for it dancers Gerald Casel and Magdalena Jarkowicz were joined by Georgina Kleege, an author and activist, and Mara Mills, a professor of media, culture and communication at NYU. Mills’s text was delivered via video, which was shown on the side of a cube centered on the stage, the cube also serving as a prop for the dancers. The video was seen off and on throughout the live dance. Mills’s narrative included the terrible story of Tanaquil Le Clercq, a young ballerina and Balanchine’s wife, who contracted polio that left her in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. But this was not a story about disability, rather it was about Le Clercq’s rehabilitation exercises and how they influenced the choreography of “Agon,” which Balanchine created when he finally left her bedside. In one instance Jarkowicz repeatedly attempted to balance on point on the cube, a feat as difficult as some of Le Clercq’s rehab exercises must have been for her. The section also addressed how blind persons might become audiences for dance with new audio technologies that are being developed. Kleege, who is blind, danced an extended trio with Casel and Jarkowicz, while speaking of these new technologies and what the blind might bring to dance.



The afternoon ended with “Paramodernities #3,” devoted to Ailey’s “Revelations,” in which Tommy DeFrantz joined dancers Stanley Gambucci, Jeremy “Jae” Neal, Nicholas Leichter, Engel-

Adams and Yerushalmy in a section centered on race and gender. In his talk, DeFrantz noted that Ailey made space for homosexuality as well as blackness on the stage. But what the dance made clear is how much of Ailey’s movement has become iconic, instantly recognizable as an imaginary of black identity.

The above remarks only touch the surface of what goes on in “Paramodernities.” It will take more thought and repeated viewings to adequately penetrate its multiple layers. It should be emphasized that Yerushalmy works her magic with many talented collaborators. At the same time, she remains a modest presence. Ambitious as “Paramodernities” is, I never felt it was about her. Even though she danced in several of the sections, it was always as part of a group. The focus remained steadily on a critical examination of how each choreographer’s dances relates to modernism and to our concerns today. New York Live Arts has scheduled “Paramodernities” for spring 2019 and the work will tour elsewhere, so it should reach many who missed it at Jacob’s Pillow.

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