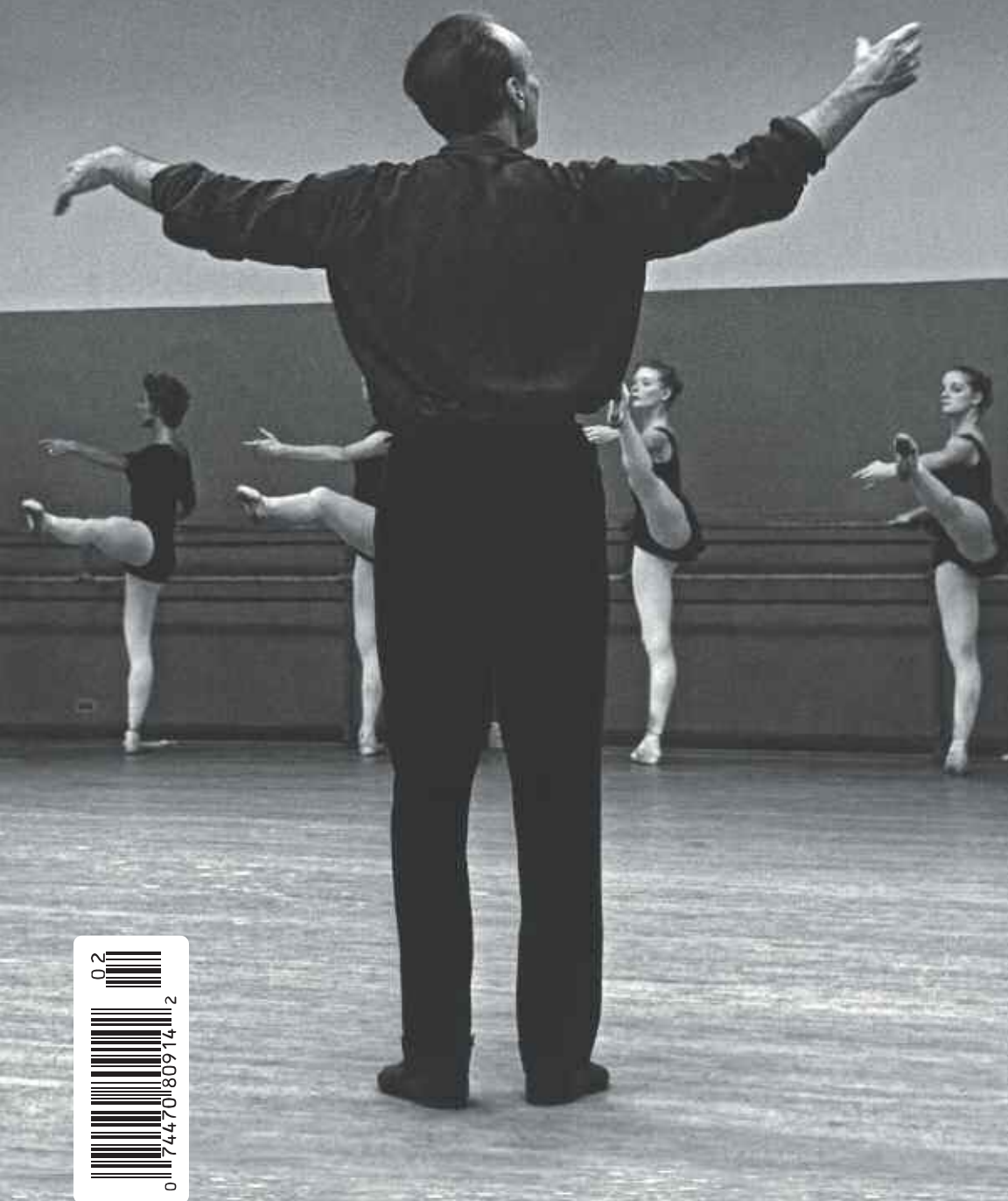


Summer 2017

Ballet Review



**Ballet Review 45.2
Summer 2017**

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Next Wave 2016

Karen Greenspan

The abundance of fresh and challenging programming for the 2016 Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music propelled me from performance to performance like a giddy child on a sugar rush in a candy store. Very soon into the season, it dawned on me that the productions in the smaller venues – especially BAM Fisher – eclipsed those larger, well-financed spectacles in the Howard Gilman Opera House. Why was this? Were there fewer expectations from the lesser known artists? Was greater creativity generated from organizations with limits on budget, dancers, and grandiosity? It seemed to me that less was producing way more than more was.

Yoann Bourgeois' collection of physical theater vignettes called *Minuit* (Midnight) is a refreshing gem. In this series of movement scenes, Bourgeois and his collaborators Marie Fonte and Jörg Müller wring the dramatic possibilities (humor, delight, awe, melancholy) from the human body and the physical forces acting upon it. Most of the music composed and played live by the supremely talented and expressive musician Laure Brisa uses varying combinations of harp, synthesizer, drums, and voice.

Bourgeois, who comes from a nouveau cirque background, brings to his creative process the element of "play." Like a circus juggler, he plumbs the physical magic revealed in what he calls "the suspension point," the brief moment of weightlessness "when an object thrown in the air arrives at the summit of its arc." It is most unforgettably demonstrated in his piece *Fugue/Trampoline*, in which he performs a solo "falling" dance during which he repeatedly falls from a staircase onto a trampoline and rebounds continually upward on the flight of steps. In the program notes, Bourgeois offers that his creative di-

rection was to focus on "allowing for a new form of performance liberated from the need to be spectacular." This "liberation from the spectacular" and his complete surrender to the laws of physics are the ingredients for pure poetry when he dances *Fugue/Trampoline* to the elegiac Philip Glass composition *Metamorphosis Two*. His seemingly magical ascension up the staircase looks effortless and takes on a spiritual symbolism.

The large-scale work *monumental* performed by Canada's award-winning contemporary dance company The Holy Body Tattoo to live music performed by the post-rock band Godspeed You! Black Emperor and film projections by William Morrison, promised to deliver a statement on the physical anxiety of contemporary corporate culture. Co-choreographers Dana Gingras and Noam Gagnon give the piece a powerful set-up by stationing the nine dancers, dressed in typical, drab, office attire, atop pedestals of varying heights. The dancers perform movements harvested from postures and gestures of stress, boredom, discomfort, angst, and nervous tics while confined to the spatial constraints of their isolated pillar, visually conveying the sentiment that corporate culture is pervaded by repetitious drudgery and alienation.

The band, situated upstage on an invisible upper story, seems to be floating in the distance. At times the musicians completely disappear from view when text or films are projected onto the scrim hanging in front of them. Marc Parent's brilliant and complex lighting design brings the dancers, sculptural pillars, and band into dramatic relief highlighting varying relationships between each of the elements. Unfortunately, Jenny Holzer's trite text projected behind the dancers detracts from the choreography and from the overall message.

After almost an hour of confinement to the pedestals, the dancers start to fall or jump off and expand the choreography to the floor in another much-too-long enactment – this time of hostile and dysfunctional group dynamics set to high-voltage rock music. The group, the



Yoann Bourgeois' *Minuit*. (Photo: Max Gordon, Brooklyn Academy of Music)

movement, and the music devolve into utter violence and chaos in a monochromatic, dystopian vision of the corporate environment. The piece suffers from too many ingredients left too long on the stage. To their credit, the handsome, focused, technically proficient, energetic performers brought emotional and physical intensity to the piece.

Celebrated choreographer and visual artist Shen Wei led the audience on a journey through a disturbing landscape in his new work *Neither*. This piece, set to Morton Feldman's hour-long "anti-opera" by the same name, for orchestra and soprano, with a mere, sixteen-line libretto by Samuel Beckett, depicts the natural predilection and struggle to

move from darkness toward light. The scene is set as the audience enters the Howard Gilman Opera House to behold Shen Wei's giant oil and acrylic painting, *Untitled No.1*, with violent swirls, drips, and splotches of black, white, and shades of gray projected onto the curtain screen. As the piece begins, the screen is raised to reveal another Shen Wei design – the cavernous gray set enclosed by three walls with three large, arched doors carved into each wall. At various intervals, these doors open to allow dancers to enter and exit and to temporarily allow pools of light to shine through to the stage.

The eleven dancers, garbed in pajama-like costumes in shades ranging from black to white, at times look like moving particles sus-

suspended in a gray matrix. Cynthia Koppe performs an extensive solo of Shen Wei's signature floor work – swirling, thrashing, coiling in arcs across multiple planes – as if she is possessed. A series of piercing high notes unleashes a beautiful spiraling, turning solo performed by Zak Ryan Schlegel. Like a helix, he corkscrews to the floor into a series of handstands and spirals back up with dreamlike fluidity.

Midway through the work, the dancers enter the stage encased in shimmering cellophane sheeting. With inherent visual drama, the dancers shed the see-through encasements like sloughed-off snakeskin to reveal they are wearing form-fitting cellophane costumes



The Holy Body Tattoo in *Monumental*. (Photo: Jack Vartoogian, BAM)

that dazzle as they display the dancers' moving bodies within. However, in a visual stunt that takes things too far, the discarded heaps of cellophane are lifted into the air by dozens of invisible harnesses so that the amorphous mass of plastic hovers above the dancers like a ghost. After much frenetic movement across the stage and through doorways, the dancers perform a unison sequence as Jennifer Tipton's lighting grows into a warm glow. And like moths to a flame, the dancers gather in a central puddle of light reaching up toward its source as the music and dance end in that instant.

The projection of the Beckett text, designed by Rocco DiSanti, onto a wall of the set seemed unnecessary as the libretto was already printed in the program. Once again, I question the need for displaying words when creating dance – a nonverbal expression. The bodies should communicate the message – and indeed, they did.

Company Wang Ramirez delivered a breath

of fresh air with its fifty-five-minute duet *Monchichi*. The intercultural couple, Honji Wang and Sébastien Ramirez, stretched their b-boy chops into a living, breathing, expressive narrative – and rendered a charming love story (that happens to be autobiographical). Under magical lighting designed by Cyril Mulon, the two dancers use their formidable break-dance skills peppered with other movement influences to communicate honest emotion in this conceptual dance piece. The opening scene shows the dancers, each in a separate area of the stage (in their own separate worlds), simply exploring the movement of individual body parts. Human emotion visibly courses through Ramirez's body as he notices "the girl" and works up the courage to move toward her. With an enchanting hint of circus mime, Ramirez plucks a lit, red Christmas light off a branch (from the tree that is the lone element of the stage set designed by Ida Ravn) and uses it to entice her into a game of catch.

Not satisfied with merely speaking multiple movement languages (b-boy, tango, contemporary), the duo, in an organic integration of tanztheater – frequently carries the narrative in any of the many languages in which they are fluent and then glides naturally into a movement phrase to finish the thought. The evolution of their relationship is revealed in comical moments that grow out of onstage dress-up or are induced by their spoken words – especially when they both face the audience and spout off, shifting from one language to another, about their complicated backgrounds (Wang grew up in Germany with Korean parents and Ramirez grew up in France but is of Spanish origin). Ramirez drew a laugh from the audience when he admitted that they usually speak English with each other which infuriates his parents.

Their dancing is breathtaking – especially their use of freezes as they take an athletic or emotion-induced movement, build its speed and momentum, and then suddenly arrest it mid-air in a crazy one-arm balance or a sudden jump into an unexpected lift. Wang's earlier background in ballet and martial arts adds stylistic range, grace, and ultimately freedom, to the movement vocabulary. Breaking the habit of symmetrical repetition of movement would nudge their work toward more sophisticated phrasing and nuance.

The duo moves powerfully through space, and in a striking example, Wang walks a long diagonal downstage as Ramirez rolls along the floor between her footsteps. This movement theme develops as they reverse roles again and again. They expand the theme into different configurations and on different parts of the

stage. The spare movement (no dress-up, no talk) expresses it all – their complete merging as a coequal couple. The final elegant tableau reprises an earlier movement motif – a duet in which they face each other with just their finger tips grazing as their arms ripple in wavelike motions. They are lit in silhouette. The rippling arm waves gradually overlap as the two bodies draw closer together. The two bodies overlap. The merged silhouettes embrace. The stage goes dark.

In *Vortex Temporum*, Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker takes us on a mind-blowing investigation of “What is the shape of sound?” *Vortex*, which premiered in 2013, is set to a 1996 score for seven musicians (sextet plus conductor) of the same name by Gérard Grisey (who died in 1998 at the age of fifty-two), a French composer who explored notions of pure sound and its relationship to time. De Keersmaecker's choreographic work has always had a serious and fundamental relationship with music; a couple of years ago in an interview, De Keersmaecker told me, “I



Cynthia Koppe and Alex Speedie in Shen Wei's *Neither*.
(Photo: Stephanie Berger, BAM)

like to watch the music.” She has made this happen in *Vortex*.

The dance begins with pure sound played onstage by Ictus, the contemporary music ensemble that frequently collaborates with De Keersmaeker. Under harsh fluorescent rehearsal lighting without the refinements of a curtain, backdrop, or wings, the six musicians walk onstage, sit down, and abruptly play washes of sound composed of echoing arpeggios that seemed to orbit outward like ripples from a stone hitting a pool of water. The black Marley stage floor is marked up with a scribble of intersecting chalk circles like geometric concepts on a blackboard. The sounds build until the cacophony is almost unbearable and then the piano takes over with a solo that ends in crashing chords. Meanwhile, the other musicians exit with their instruments, and finally, the pianist exits as well.

Six dancers from De Keersmaeker’s company Rosas, wearing pedestrian clothes (black pants, shirts, and sneakers), enter and assume

the spatial arrangement onstage that had previously been inhabited by the musicians. Performing in silence, each dancer, linked to a particular musician, embodies that voice of the music through his/her movements and traveling patterns in space. The dancers’ spiraling turns, reaches, arm-slicing movements, skitters, sideward leans, forward hovers, spasmodic jumps, and circular locomotion patterns are true to the sonic colors and rhythms of the music. The relationships between the dancers clearly correlate to the interrelationships between the instrumental voices of the sextet.

While playing their instruments, the musicians (now seven, including the conductor) return to the stage and, like an elegant and complex system of celestial bodies, begin to move, along with the dancers (also now seven in number). In this stunning section, even the grand piano is wheeled around the stage in a giant orbit while the pianist walks forward, sideward, and backward as he plays the

plodding chords. I’ve seen De Keersmaeker require the musicians to dance, but never the instruments as well. Everyone on stage revolves as if in a swirling vortex. As the revolutions grow wider, the sound decelerates and becomes lower as the lights are almost entirely extinguished.

The final vortex section is an amazing meditation on sound. The slow, deep chords of the piano sound like the slowed-down beating of a heart. This is followed by a breathy blowing on the flute combined with the lightest bowing of the stringed instruments to create the sound of slowed respiration, as if heard from inside the lungs or an echo chamber. It continues slowing down and softening for a very long time as the lights gradually dim, until all that is visible, in a tiny golden glow, are the conductor’s hands pulsating like a contracting heart muscle.



Honji Wang and Sébastien Ramirez in *Monchichi*.
(Photo: Julieta Cervantes, BAM)



Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's *Vortex Temporum*. (Photo: Robert Altman, BAM)

In *Plexus*, French theater director Aurélien Bory and Japanese dancer Kaori Ito have co-created a riveting physical theater piece as well as a work of exceptional sculptural beauty. *Plexus*, which means “intertwining” in Latin, is a solo for Ito. It begins as she, clad in a short, white, satin nightgown, stands downstage in front of a black curtain and places a stethoscope on her chest as if to gauge her internal well-being. We hear a deep, oceanic heartbeat. The impulses ripple through her whole body until they grow out of control and she rips off the instrument. She applies it to another part of her body, and another – causing different sound effects each time that are reflected by different reactions in her body. Finally, she backs into the curtain, which enfolds her and then detaches from the stage. As the black fabric is sucked away, Ito is left standing within a giant cage of more than 5700 vertically strung, black nylon strands – a mind-blowing metaphor for life.

The strings completely supported Ito's movement explorations at odd angles – upside

down, falling, and leaning. This along with the dazzling lighting designed by Arno Veyrat create ever-changing optical illusions. The pulsating electronic music by Joan Cambon augments the experience as well. The dancer begins to test and resist the boundaries of her prison/palace – bumping up against the sides, stomping across the floor, and eventually falling back and forth full tilt. At this point, we realize that this 18-by-18-foot structure is actually suspended and is capable of moving in every direction, which it does as a result of Ito's violent thrusts. These movements, amplified by crashing sounds from the sound score, intensify this wild scene of perpetual flux.

It proceeds into a section during which she treads sensuously across the width of the box and then doubles back on herself to traverse the cage in the opposite direction. She repeats this over and over, threading her steps through each row of strings. In the blink of an eye, Ito is suspended from the top of the cage. She is gradually lowered only to climb back up again



Kaori Ito in *Plexus*. (Photo: Max Gordon, BAM)

and repeat the maneuver many times – now weaving herself vertically through the three-dimensional loom. The play of golden light on her moving body, the sculptural verticality of the silvery lit strands of nylon, and the celestial sound score designed by Stéphane Ley animate the piece with otherworldly splendor.

Ito varies her angles of ascent and descent causing the cage to swing violently as if she were desperate to be free of the constraining structure. By some magical means, the billowy black fabric envelopes her and leaves her clothed in a long black dress covered in large golden dots. She performs one last crashing dance until, suddenly – in the blink of an eye – the cage is empty.

Zvi Gotheiner and the brilliant and nuanced dancers of his company, ZviDance, revived Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation manifesto *On the Road* in a one-hour work by the same name. To begin the artistic research, Gotheiner invited four of his dancers to join him on a two-

week, cross-country road trip from New York to Pittsburgh, Chicago, Des Moines, Omaha City, Denver, Salt Lake City, Reno, and San Francisco – retracing Kerouac's first westward venture as described in the novel. Media artist, Josh Higgason, accompanied the group to document the journey on video. This video, skillfully engineered by Higgason, provides a riveting element of the choreography.

Gotheiner explains in his program notes that he read Kerouac's *On the Road* around the time he arrived in New York from his native country, Israel, at age twenty-four. He admitted what a profound impact the book had on him, recalling that it glorified the indi-

vidual and suggested lifestyle possibilities of experimentation and spontaneity totally foreign to his upbringing on a kibbutz that groomed him, instead, for responsibility to the community and the country. The idea of creating a dance based on the book had been brewing for years.

The stage is set with a giant double screen across the back. Upon entering BAM Fisher's Fishman Space, sped-up, looped footage of highway travel from the vantage point of someone in the front seat looking out the windshield is projected on one screen. On the other, the caption reads, "and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell." Throughout the piece, video footage of the cross-country road trip is projected either across both screens or on one screen while a chosen quote from the book is at times displayed on the other. The video design plays with speed and focus – sometimes capturing endless space, highway monotony, small-town USA, bright

lights/big cities, tunnels, traffic, as well as the four dancers' experience of these things while on the road. (The research involved stopping to dance and improvise on or near the road in various locations.) Each section, or chapter, of the piece combines a new section of video and live dancing in an innate synthesis heightened with mood-capturing, original music by Finnish-born composer Jukka Rintamäki.

The house lights dim and blurry images overwhelm both screens as Alex Biegelson, lost in personal reverie, dances onstage to a pulsing, sultry tune. A disco atmosphere is evoked as Chelsea Ainsworth joins Biegelson in a smooth and sensuous, partnered social dance followed by the other dancers who connect and disconnect before dancing off. There is a sense of transience as the dancers make their entrances from one side of the stage, dance across it, and exit the other side. The social interactions are intense and noticeably pleasurable, but short-lived.

Isaies Santamaria Perez performs a wild and quirky solo in relation to the white line projected across the floor of the stage. His full-bodied, wildly exuberant physicality is juxtaposed with video footage of a pair of lower legs in sneakers dancing along the white line on the side of a road. The caption on the other screen reads, "Purity of the road. The white line in the middle of the highway unrolled and nagged our left front tire as if glued to the groove."

Ying-Ying Shiao and William Tomaskovic pair up and then repeatedly get blown apart from each other, knocked down by the force of a speeding truck rushing by on the accompanying video. In an-

other section, defined by footage of snowy scenes with Colorado highway signs, Shiao and Santamaria Perez appear to brave the elements and protect each other as they huddle side-by-side clasping each other's waist to run, skitter, and trudge together. Layered behind this deeply connected duet are scenes of the four road-tripping dancers, in full winter gear, clumped together trying to stay warm while the snow is dancing wildly around them.

There are many distinct and intensely felt solos, duets, and trios describing many qualities of Americana as well as human relationships. One example is the luscious and tender duet danced by Ainsworth and Tomaskovic in front of a giant image of comforting diner food centered on a mouthwatering piece of pie à la mode. Another is the outrageous solo performed by Doron Perk in a fit of delirium over arriving at the gaudy glitz of Reno (or maybe it was the elation of getting out of the van after twelve hours of driving that day.) Dancing shirtless, Perk wildly turns, jerks his torso,



Doron Perk In Zvi Gotheiner's *On the Road*. (Photo: Ian Douglas, BAM)

and performs handstands that literally skate across the floor. Veteran ZviDance member Kuan Hui Chew also puts forth a most sensitive performance in her various roles.

These are balanced with powerful and joyous ensemble dancing – using Gotheiner’s weighty, rhythmic, stomping patterns; gestures; shouts; and claps – especially in coordination with the video footage of driving at night through brightly lit tunnels, across the Golden Gate Bridge, and arriving into San Francisco. The dancers and choreography project the thrill of reaching the destination, as well as a comfort and familiarity with the urban energy, as they form a diagonal line from which individual dancers peel off to dance a solo and then return to the grooving line.

Gotheiner’s *On the Road* is not a reenactment of the book, but rather, a qualitative examination of the book’s timeless themes – the exuberance of youth, the impulse to break free of regimented living, and the call of the open road – something people of any generation, age, and nationality can relate to.

This year’s Next Wave Festival benefitted from a new experiment called the Brooklyn-Paris Exchange. The idea grew out of conversations between BAM Executive Producer Joseph V. Melillo and Théâtre de la Ville director Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota. In an innovative exchange, each executive chose two companies or artists to debut as part of the other institution’s season as well as at home. This arrangement definitely bumped up the level of artistic innovation and variety – both coming and going. These works, when presented at BAM, debuted in the more intimate Fishman Space in BAM Fisher – and certainly factored into my resonating with the productions in that venue. Nonetheless, judging from the range, quality, and quantity of works presented over the three months of the festival in all three of the BAM live performance venues, I can confidently state that creative energy and authentic expression are thriving in the modern dance world today – provoking work that is strong, daring, and wonderfully affecting.

Dancing Black Lives (Matter)

Karen Greenspan

The summer of 2016 was boiling over with public outcry and protest over repeated incidents of the killing of unarmed black men at the hands of police officers across the country. The Black Lives Matter movement, initiated by three black women in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin, had become a decentralized international network responding to the systemic racism toward black people in our society. And by that, I mean our global society – for colonialism and the practice of slavery have exerted their toxic influence both near and far. Black Lives Matter creates platforms for affirmation of the value and contributions of black people through dialogue and engagement and has grown beyond its original online forum to become a much larger social and political action movement.

As I attended BAM’s Next Wave Festival, it became clear to me that these issues were front and center for Nora Chipaumire, Kyle Abraham, and Reggie Wilson – the black choreographers featured in the festival. How could it not be? Dance is a well-disposed platform for the Black Lives Matter conversation, and these choreographers’ distinct, courageous, and brutally honest voices sparked thought, awareness, and dialogue for everyone involved. Audiences, tempered by ongoing seasons riven by continued tragedies borne of racial tensions, misperceptions, and misunderstandings, were sensitized and ready to grapple with these issues within the forum of BAM’s Next Wave Festival.

From the moment you entered the BAM Fishman Space, you faced an all-out assault for which the ushers merely offered plastic sun visors for protection from the harsh illumination. Nora Chipaumire – “daughter of Zimbabwe,” performance artist, and resident