

Wednesday December 12, 2018

Arts > Arts > Dance

FACT/SF turns 10 with premiere of 'death'



Liane Burns and LizAnne Roman Roberts appeared in FACT/SF's "Remains," a companion piece to "death," opening this week at CounterPulse. (Courtesy Gema Galina)

By Leslie Katz on September 26, 2018 8:00 am

San Francisco choreographer Charles Slender-White's upcoming premiere "death" at CounterPulse represents the culmination of a two-year investigation of grief and loss.

As his contemporary troupe FACT/SF observes its 10th anniversary, "death," opening this week, follows his similarly themed 2017-18 works "Remains," "Life" and "Memoria."

Yet although these projects started in 2016, Slender-White says his concerns about the topic began at the beginning of his life, having lost his mother when he was a baby.

“For me, grief and loss were a pre-condition. I never had the experience of developing a relationship with my mother,” says Slender-White, who grew up in Southern California and earned degrees in dance and performance and English literature from the University of California, Berkeley. (He entered school as a pre-law student on the diving team, but veered toward dance upon taking a class in the physical education department, receiving encouragement, and ultimately appreciating the intellectual component of the dance program.)

In “Remains” and “death,” he and his dancers employ evocative props he calls XOs. Kind of like exoskeletons, the forms are 3-D casts of the performers created by contouring packing tape over their bodies.

“We felt it appropriate to make doppelgangers of ourselves; we have a special relationship with them,” he says, adding that they have a “fascinating” component, being empty on the inside.

While he says, “It’s hard to show something that’s not there,” the casts were created to represent absence or loss.

“They continue to bring up interesting questions about life – not just organs and blood, but history, memories and ideas, things that relate to loss and the way we keep people alive. People are dead in the world, but they continue to live in our psyches, through physical objects and through ephemera they’ve left behind,” he adds.

Ten body casts (which don’t collapse) are taking up space in the basement at CounterPulse. But when FACT/SF toured Russia in 2012, Slender-White says, they had to create new ones at every stop.

Unusually, Slender-White began his professional career in Russia, performing with the high-profile Provincial Dances Theatre led by Tatiana Baganova, whom he met as a student at the American Dance Festival in 2004.

“I harassed her for two years to offer me a job,” says Slender-White, who didn’t know Russian when he arrived in the country: “My first set of vocab words were body parts and stage directions, not ‘cup,’ ‘table’ or ‘chair,’” he says.

He danced with the company for 18 months, then spent the remainder of his two-year stay in Russia teaching at the university level.

Upon his return to the U.S., realizing he wouldn’t likely get hired by the few choreographers with whom he wanted to work (Pina Bausch, Emilio Greco, William Forsythe, Stephen Petronio), he decided to start a company in Northern California, where he had friends and family.

“FACT/SF came out of the naivete of a 24-year-old,” says Slender-White, who, at the time thought, “If I can’t dance for these five or six artists, I need to try to make the work I want to see in the world.”

Now, he says, “I have the chops to take it on.”

He has a few goals for “death,” an interactive production in which the audience (limited to 40) moves around, and each person has a brief one-on-one encounter with a performer.

As the dance explores both shared and unique aspects of grief, Slender-White hopes it will provide each patron the opportunity for individual catharsis.

At the same time, he says, “Being in the presence of other humans can be useful; let’s get together and be human in real time, in real space, with real bodies.”

IF YOU GO

FACT/SF

Where: CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F.

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; closes Oct. 13

Tickets: \$15 to \$35

Contact: (415) 626-2060, counterpulse.org/event/death