

# BAM 2004 Next Wave Festival

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Flash Review 2, 12-8: Rubik's Cube Meets its Own Personal Jesus

Understanding Kim; Puzzling Achugar

By Maura Nguyen Donohue

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NEW YORK -- Shared programs can be a challenge or a boon for an audience member. Having been assigned a fair amount of shared evenings for my own company, I've often wondered what connection presenters have made mentally to bring me into the same space as another artist. Different from the showcase situation, a shared program implies that there is some underlying connection that pulls my work into the same creation, technical, production, performance schedule and, perhaps, dressing room as an otherwise foreign entity. While perusing the program notes for a recent shared concert between Sam Kim and Luciana Achugar at Dance Theater Workshop, I could understand why these two artists were considered a good match. However, while watching the program I suffered the realization of my usual expectation. Two distinctly different visions don't always cohabit easily, even when the artists in question have a prior history of working together.

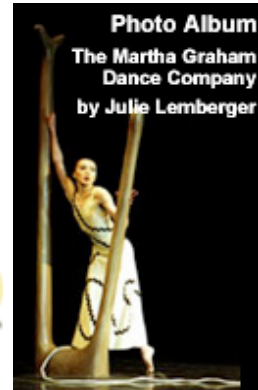


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As a member of DTW's board of directors, I acknowledge bias. But not having participated in developing the program notes, I think I can safely salute the introduction to and questions for the artists posed by DTW's artistic director. Cathy Edwards writes about artists in a highly informed and articulate manner and her questions reveal some deeper glimpse into the work of artists without giving up too much about the artist's work. For Kim and Achugar, I didn't get to the notes until after viewing their work but Edwards's comments about them clarified my vague response to the two women's pairing. I had been trying to define some kind of vague 'generational' difference between us. This was brought on very clearly by Kim's choice of music but was heightened by both women's relationship to movement.



Kim's dryly playful "Nobody Understands Me" takes us back to the '80s -- yep, bad blazers, big hair and lots o' synth pop. Duran Duran's "Planet Earth" bursts from the speakers as a roving spotlight moves across a back curtain of shiny mylar strips before settling on Kim, Anna Azrieli and Tracy Dickson standing upstage right. Kim slowly makes her way across stage over the course of the song simply shaking her hips and head, as if easily avoiding eye contact while walking down the high school hallway jamming to her Walkman. While Kim's choreographic style is full of post-modern understatement, she can't totally squelch the unavoidable bounciness of that decade. As the women make their way diagonally across the stage with a kind of cross-country skier spring and jog and waving hands, I catch glimpses of marching bands and aerobics classes fleeting briefly across the landscape of each dancer's body.

The mylar curtain absorbs and reflects Michael Stiller's lighting design in luscious moments, as when the stage suddenly goes Bubbalicious blue or when the gobo rotators start sending spinning lights across the back to Depeche Mode. The scenic elements and songs serve as a kind of antithesis to the almost laissez-faire repetition of Azrieli and Dickson tapping their feet and punching their hands into the air like stoned cheerleaders. Somewhere along the way I realize that it is actually a hypnotically satisfying compliment to the square pulse of "Personal Jesus." A group of very big-haired, sparkling tunic clad women burst forward from behind the mylar to simply bounce like aerobic fembots and then recede. I'm reminded of Wonder Woman's Amazon sisters from Paradise Island and recall my own teen fantasies, which led to covering my white lace junior prom dress with, and fashioning a skinny forehead band out of, many golden sequins.

My companion, fellow Dance Insider Peggy Cheng, laughs with guilt when Yaz's love ballad "Only You" comes on and tells me later that she still knows all the words. It sets me to thinking that though much of this music was part of my youth and subsequent social identity, it was a fleeting flirtation and didn't settle in enough for me to understand why anyone would ever want to go back. Somewhere in there though Kim has a pretty raucous solo

that makes me think that though we were probably just far apart enough in age to have never mingled if we had hung out then, she would have been the very witty and wry friend. The one with a wild streak who only served martinis, extra-dry.

Near the end of "Nobody Understands Me," a couple of dancers run at each other and fall down together repeatedly. While dramatically compelling, it never develops beyond a kind of movement study, which is what Luciana Achugar's "A Super Natural Return to Love" feels like throughout. Or rather, it did after Kim's piece and an intermission. Artists, though placed with limitations of time and space on their work for the sake of the split bill, are still going to make their work with a kind of tunnel vision. It isn't their job to manage how well the evening runs and in DTW's position of producing premieres no one has any idea how the show will feel. Here I find the program notes helpful in creating a greater empathy for the artists when fatigue and other discomforts have started to descend.

To be fair, Achugar clearly did a lot of work on this piece. It is a thorough investigation; it's just that it feels extensively thorough. A group of six women, including Achugar, Azrieli, Willa Carroll, Jennifer Kjos, Kim Osterberger and Beatrice Wong will interpret variations on drudgery, repetition and group dynamics. At times I'm reminded of Fritz Lang's film "Metropolis," and then Rudolf Laban's movement choirs. When the women first gather in a corner of where two wall set pieces meet they appear to be loitering service ladies. All are clad in blue uniform dresses, hairnets and stockings, a clearly industrial image that when matched with a Go-Gos remix by Pierre de Gaillande and Gary Greenblatt transforms them into clearly female images of industry like a group of Rosie the Riveters or synchronized Esther Williamses.

Achugar blends into the group seamlessly; it is testament to her process and staging that the choreographer's onstage presence doesn't dynamically overwhelm the other performers. She achieves a group integration very effectively, painstakingly making these striking women interchangeable in the same careful way that mass production has done to the workforce. The work wanders but remains constantly unrelenting, much like a problem that your brain insists on resolving while you try to sleep until it's suddenly 3 a.m. and bleary-eyed you finally succumb, letting the images roll over you.

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