

Superfluities Redux

On culture and theatre, by George Hunka

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Embodied Doubles: Blind Spot

Blind Spot. Choreography, direction, set design and sound design by Pavel Zuštiak. Lighting design by Joe Levasseur. Costumes by Nick Vaughan. Music by Tiersen, Pompouguac, Taizé. Photography by José Aragón. "The Voice": Jeffrey Fracè. Performed and created with Gina Bashour, Yo-el Cassell, Ashleigh Leite and Anthony Whitehurst. A production of [Palissimo](#). Running time: 70 minutes, no intermission. At Performance Space 122, 150 First Avenue at East Ninth Street. Reviewed at the 11 June 2008 performance. Runs 11-15 June 2008. Tickets and schedule information at PS122's [Web site](#).

Pavel Zuštiak's meditation on love, desire and the recalcitrant body returns for an encore performance.



Oxygen as a sexualised fetish for life: Ashleigh Leite in *Blind Spot*
(Photo: José Aragón)

In dance theatre, bodies are what we have to work with: when Yo-el Cassell emerges to begin [Palissimo's](#) *Blind Spot*, originally premiered at Chashama in 2003 and returning for an all-too-few members of the audience via American Sign Language. Movement bears the weight of the conventional linguistic signifier: the body entire speaks instead of the mouth, which in dance nearly reaches the status of fetish itself. Touching desire, the body starts to yammer hopelessly, its expression confined to the private sphere between two people, and ever-imperfect: the speaking body becomes tongue-tied. Untying that tongue is the project of Pavel Zuštiak's beautiful, elegant, sexy and winning full-length dance piece. There are points at which it nearly touches the sublime, and I'm not at all sure that it doesn't in fact succeed at that. But that would leave Zuštiak and his company nowhere to go, and it's exciting to think that in future work they will indeed go further.

In *Blind Spot*, there are three couples among the four dancers. A man (Cassell) and a woman (Gina Bashour) in everyday dress attempt the expression of desire, but among these "real" bodies there are two strangers, dressed more brightly. Anthony Whitehurst, in white t-shirt and pants, is Cassell's body double; Bashour's is Ashleigh Leite, who emerges wearing a blonde wig and wearing a pale fringed leotard (and later a silver dress: the fine costumes here are the work of Nick Vaughan). When Cassell and Bashour meet, the sudden and unexpected emergence of desire calls upon their bodies to express that desire in a manner in which they had not expressed it before: they suddenly realize Whitehurst and Leite as untrained potentials for expression in their own bodies. Much of the 70 minute program consists of the clumsy attempts of the real couple to negotiate and incorporate the Ideal couple within themselves (and the consequent real coupling to Ideal coupling).

The couple has their work cut out for them. Cassell, violently trying to manipulate Whitehurst's hopelessly liquid arms, finds them completely useless, unable to grasp or hold (an amusing metaphor for impotence). Bashour's challenge is different – Leite, once unleashed, is everywhere on the stage, bouncing against its boundaries, violently birthing new possibilities of movement and expression, finding bizarre pleasure as well as profound irritation at being contained within the spatial limits of the performance area. In a series of duets, trios and quartets, each performer attempts to come to terms with the dynamics of desire: at times the Real and the Ideal, potential and realisation, can be glimpsed in the triangulations of desire so well expressed by [Anne Carson's meditations](#) on Eros and Sappho's poetry. Bashour, looking beyond Cassell, sees an Ideal of desire and love in Whitehurst: she recognises the potential and indeed can dance with him, be swept up in the possibility. It is left to Cassell to embody that potential in the real.

Eventually, in the hopeful dénouement, the couples – all three of them – are engaged together: both the paired women and the paired men are able to incorporate elements of each other's potential, thereby staking a claim to the expression of desire between Bashour and Cassell. The visible fetishistic attributes of desire – here, four pairs of shoes, two men's and two women's – are comically manipulated only to be violently disposed of once the potential for expression is entirely embodied in corporeal movement rather than objects. Finally, desire having matured, Leite can tear away the translucent plastic curtain to unveil the linguistic expression of desire: the body has found voice for the precision of love. Desire is dangerous: the final duet between Cassell and Whitehurst indicates, without conclusion, that the body in desire is always poised between a life-enhancing swim in its possibilities and a risk of drowning. But as the text presented at the end of *Blind Spot* indicates, where nothing is risked, nothing is gained. Every real body is capable of a prayer to desire's potential; but then one needs consciously to pray for it.

Rereading the above, I can sense a certain linguistic thickness in this description of *Blind Spot*. This is, however, dance: where words fail. This description shouldn't serve as analysis, but as tentative approximation. What words and photography can't catch are the beautiful bodies and movements of the four performers in this violently energetic essay. It is a work, perhaps, of modest means, though this modesty manages to render it far more egalitarian, far freer, than other recent attempts at limning the same themes (the self-important, overproduced, smug wankery of Romeo Castellucci's *Hey Girl!* seems for example unutterably twee next to it).

Violent stylised movement in the name of desire's expression is Zuštiak's palette here, as violent stylised spoken language is that of the drama. One could say that, here, dance is perhaps fifty years ahead of the drama – this, however, is overstating the case. Quite regularly at PS122, one finds the future of theatre in an astonishing array of works of the present, in both dance and drama. So long as Vallejo Gantner and his crew there continue to curate as brilliantly as they do, there will be newly-hewn bricks to work, and to build, with. A brick, of course, is an entirely inappropriate metaphor for the delicacy and elegance of *Blind Spot*. Nonetheless, it inspires as well as amazes.