

## **Palissimo/Pavel Zustiak in “Le Petit Mort”**

by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

I missed my first chance to see *Le Petit Mort* (Now It's Time to Say Goodbye) when director-choreographer Pavel Zustiak premiered it at P.S. 122 last December and so did many other New Yorkers. Shortly into Palissimo/Pavel Zustiak's run, after dancer Ellen Cremer suffered a mishap and Saar Harari severely injured his knee, the remaining performances were cancelled. Now this striking ensemble dance about demise has returned to P.S. 122 for a brief run that-- heaven willing--will conclude as planned: no sooner than tomorrow afternoon.

*Le Petit Mort* begins with a disturbing sonic rush that suddenly drops away to dead silence. If sound had a physical body, this opening would feel like someone big and clammy slamming into your chest then veering away as you stagger and gasp.

Harari stands at one side of the space, his back plastered against the theater's wall, his hands raised high as if the sudden grey wash of dim light has caught him in the midst of a holdup or arrest. He repeatedly slips down towards the floor but isn't completely in the throes of death. That dark lump at his feet is the body of a woman, and his jerky pelvic gyrations suggests that there's some life left in his crotch and in hers. The French, after all, call orgasm “le petit mort.”

For the next hour or so, we survey an unsavory, weirdly enigmatic landscape. Benjamin Asriel, Gina Bashour, Maríya Wethers, Cremer, Harari and Zustiak--costumed in funereal colors and wearing smudged, smoky eye makeup to make their expressionless faces look even deader-- propel themselves to the floor and into each other in ways in which human beings, not being made of rubber, were never meant to do. They dash around the space, making rough contact, engaging in careless, sometimes ominous handling of one another. That tight, prolonged embrace of a partner's back and neck looks like an attempt to kill him.

A masterfully executed passage finds the dancers trading among themselves the role of slumping corpse--caught, lifted and swiftly, buoyantly ported about to the music's hysterical lilt. In one perverse scene, Asriel--the corpse of the moment--gets propped up, decorated with a party hat and surrounded by his peers for a series of group photos.

Like Zustiak's fascinating if unsettling choreography, Joe Lavasseur's expert lighting feels eerily dry and cold, given to either unrelieved murk or something starkly clinical and exposing. A silky curtain topped by fluorescent light bulbs (set by Nick Vaughan) receives the projection of hazy video images in which only one repeated moment--a scene of people running towards the camera--can be identified with any certainty. Sometimes one or another dancer will drop or be dragged and splay out behind the curtain, feet thrust forward into view like the Wicked Witch felled by her wind-tossed house.

A door to backstage stands ajar like something out of a dream about to go bad. You don't want to walk through it or see what might emerge. And besides, there's already enough strangeness in plain view, like Asriel blowing on Harari's big toe as if to inflate him and then morphing into a lizard that writhes its massive tail as Harari strides beside it.

Zustiak's abundant, surrealist imagery gets able support from his thoroughly engaged dancers, particularly Harari, who is one hell of a creepy, nauseating shape-shifter (meant as the highest compliment).

I had a rather odd experience towards the end of Zustiak's hour. I felt as if something tugged me back from Zustiak's hypnotic scenario and I (sort of) heard: “Society's collapsing, deteriorating.” Then Asriel, pants dropped to the floor, lip-synced a countertenor's voice, and *Le Petit Mort* screeched to a halt in the blink of lights and the sickening crackle of a short circuit.