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# Virginia Woolf Inspires New Liss Fain Work

BY JEAN SCHIFFMAN

**The theme came first. Choreographer Liss Fain, of the San Francisco-based, internationally known company Liss Fain Dance, wanted to explore boundaries: the boundaries we construct for ourselves that we sometimes perceive as fixed, sometimes as flexible.**

She also wanted this new work to be a non-narrative installation/performance with text, and with the audience moving about freely. And so her latest world premiere, "After the Light," lures audiences into an immersive environment, one in which perspectives change as viewers roam at will among the dancers.

For Fain, a quarter century after Liss Fain Dance's inception, this is a relatively new approach to her work. In 2010, she had been commissioned to choreograph a piece for an art gallery in Dusseldorf. The gallery had three rooms; she created a different piece for each. The audience moved, unguided, from room to room. "It was really fun and challenging and incredibly successful," she says, in the dressing room at a SOMA dance studio after a recent rehearsal. "I loved having the dance occurring everywhere and people choosing what they wanted to see and looking where they wanted to look, and seeing the other audience members as they were watching. It took things out of my control."

When she returned home from Germany, Fain wanted to continue working this way but she also wanted to add another element: literary text. "I've always loved literature, and a lot of my work is based on what I've read," she says. "I wanted to work with writing that has a...sense of cadence and structure, with images to bring out ideas. My stuff is not about everyday life," she adds. "It's really about the physical state."

Her next two pieces were installations as well, the first based on writings by Lydia Davis ("I realized I was using her text as a musical score, and I was choreographing to the cadences and images of her text, and I loved it!"), the second on stories by Jamaica Kincaid. For "After the Light," she searched for the appropriate text to fit her theme. When she read Virginia Woolf's 1931 experimental novel "The Waves," she was enthralled, and her concept began to coalesce.

"The Waves" comprises a series of internal monologues spoken by six characters, all friends, over the course of their lives, interspersed with characterless descriptions of a coastal scene—sun, ocean—that go from dawn to nighttime. Fain chose the title for her piece, and its structure, based on that sense of progression from light to dark.

"It's all about relationships," Fain explains, of the novel. "How people influence one another's lives, how you come together with others, how they change the course

of your life. . ." Woolf's examination of these interwoven relationships, and the overriding sense of a sort of group consciousness, corresponded with Fain's idea about boundaries. "I thought, this is in a way the same thing. It's about how you define yourself. And how your relationships define you, and how you use them to define yourself." She went through the book, choosing text, reading and rereading it and beginning to create phrases, which she brought in for the dancers. As the dancers worked with the phrases, the movement inevitably changed radically, and Fain returned to the text with the fresh input, a process she describes as a continual back-and-forth.

For the text, Fain always hires actors—in this case, Val Sinckler, who worked on Fain's two previous text-based pieces, and Martin Pistone; their voices were recorded and integrated into the soundscape. When the actors first began attending rehearsals, things changed once again as the dancers responded viscerally to their voices. The text affects the dancers' bodies, says Fain—"You can feel the emotion of the text, the cadence of the voice, which is almost like music, and because it's a person speaking, the dancer also responds to the person."

The music comes in later in the process. Dan Wool, one of the project's three designers (all three of whom have collaborated on Fain's past three productions) and a longtime composer of scores for dance, film and TV, says that the soundscape for "After the Light" is on the dark side, tonally. "My sonic interpretations of the text, and of Virginia Woolf, her darkness as a person—it's hard not to respond to that," he says. "It's not that I'm deliberately going out of my way to be dark. I'm just responding. Devices like minor modes signal to our brains that this is a dark thing." And since "After the Light" concerns relationships being torn apart and coming back together, he interprets that in an acoustically literal way: friction, scraping, percussive sounds, a train, footsteps.

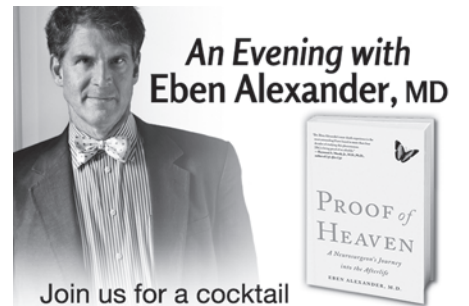
"I told him I didn't want it to be too pretty," says Fain, "because there's a sense in [Woolf's] book of people looking at themselves and also looking at one another that's a little bit edgy." Along those same lines, the idea for the set has a nesting-doll aspect: The audience is looking in at people's lives the very same way that the characters within the piece are looking at themselves and one another.

Says set/light designer Matthew Antaky, a longtime designer for theater, opera, dance and music, "This is a post-modernistic world, an emotional environment, for lack of a better term." He envisions the rectangular playing area of Z Space defined by moderately high walls that encompass audience and dancers, with the lights playing off the dancers in different ways depending upon a viewer's perspective. Maybe some architecture will float above, with lights that are a combination of translucent and reflective.

To envision costumes for the dancers, Fain and costume designer Mary Domenico, a veteran of stage costume design in the Bay Area, began by looking at Mark Rothko paintings—angular but with undefined edges, which is the way Fain imagines the world of "After the Light." The dancers are not meant to represent the specific characters whose soliloquies, along with the sensorial descriptions of nature, make up the text. Rather, explains Domenico, their physicality is meant to be sculptural, with amplified color, perhaps the crimson, black, gray and yellow of a particular Rothko painting that inspired Fain and Domenico—a visual effect that allows the audience to separate the dancers from Woolf's characters per se and see, instead, the varying perspectives and relationships among the live performers. "There should be almost a haze at the edges that leaves a little room for interpretation," says Domenico.

Production elements such as sound, costumes and set, along with text, all contribute to what Fain aims for: a unique and hybrid world in which an audience can live and move up close and personal among the dancers for the 45 or 50 minutes of the performance. "In the beginning of the dance there's a sense of people breaking out, this energy, this greeting the day," she says, "and it will end with people around the periphery of the space, and the middle of the space will be dark, and the darkness will spread through the periphery."

Jan. 9 → 12  
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