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Dances for the Jews from Breisach

The New York dance companies "Battery Dance" and "Drastic Action" performed at the Blue House in Breisach - and Freiburg high school students explored their own ways of remembering.

The Blue House in Breisach is an unusual and unique place. In fact, its reputation for singularity made the rounds all the way across the Atlantic. Thanks to the commitment and enthusiasm of an exceptional woman - psychoanalyst Christiane Walesch-Schneller - the former community center for 240 Breisach Jews was retained after it had lost its function following the deportation of the Jews on October 22, 1940. In 2003, the plain and simple building was reopened as a museum with a lecture room. More recently it was used for a very special occasion: dancers from the two dance companies "Drastic Action" and "Battery Dance" climbed, wiggled, wrought and stormed their way into the house. Window shutters were opened and shut, and opened and shut, as if to question the openness to the world. And gradually the joy over the beautiful house gave way to fears of attacks from the outside.

The Blue House is where the performance on Rheintorstraße, the former Jewish street, ended. It began at the Platz der Synagoge with "Closer than it Appears", a choreography by Aviva Geismar, whose grandparents, both killed in Auschwitz, originally came from Breisach. Hundreds of spectators came to take part in the event. Four female dancers performed seemingly harmless child's play such as sticking their heads together or teasing each other. Yet power and exclusion emerged as underlying themes. The viewers could feel that the sense of community among the dancers was constantly threatened from within. Along a rope the dancers then wrought their way across the street, passing the pizza shop and a small electronics dealer. Inhabitants of the small town stared out of their windows onto the street. For a few split seconds the audience was moved back into a time that many had discarded as irretrievable and inaccessible. The dancers from New York used the street and the house without pointing any fingers, leaving old wounds seemingly untouched. Sponsored by several institutions, the "Dances for the Blue House" continued later in the evening. The dances were performed in the school gym – not a place of choice for this type of artistic expression. However, due to heavy rain from the earlier in the day, the cozy outdoor stage was no longer an option.

Jonathan Hollander, Director from the Battery Dance, suggested that the audience imagine the atmosphere of a New York rehearsal studio. However, the audience was so carried away by the performance that the setting as such hardly seemed to matter. The show consisted of a well-balanced mix of professional pieces from New York and four choreographies that were developed in 14-day workshops with students from Freiburg's Lessing-Realschule, Kepler Gymnasium and Theodor-Heuss Gymnasium. Hollander emphasized that the choreographies were developed with and by the students.

However, spectators who were apprehensive of seeing sentimental drama or sensationalism in regard to Germany's darkest hours were pleasantly surprised. Modern, abstract dance hardly lends itself to descriptive or morally didactic expression. Perhaps that is why the project was able to fascinate the some 100 female students (and a handful of courageous male students). Instead of focusing on the historical point of departure of the "dances", the young performers navigated the emotional space of violence, exclusion and menace as well as solidarity and closeness. Groups found each other, dissolved, congregated by synchronizing their gait, formed closed circles that were impenetrable from the outside, moved together as much as possible, and disassembled as isolated individuals. Only once was a direct link to history established when the names of the 24 Breisach Jews who were deported to Gurs on October 22, 1940 were called out one after the other. An incisive and emotionally memorable scene.

Aviva Geismar showed two pieces in Breisach: "All Fall Down", a new dance from 2006 that showed similarities to "Closer than it Appears". The four women, this time all in black, explored the range of possible social relationships between encounter and submission. For the second piece, Geismar took "The Unbidden and Unhinged" from 2001 as a point of departure, developing from it a strong solo piece: a woman caught between fear and self-assertion. Jonathan Hollander, for his part, contributed with the short solo piece "Between Heaven and Earth" as well as "Secrets of the Paving Stones", a choreography he developed in Poland in 2003. A wonderful piece for two pairs of dancers that spans a broad range of history from the baroque dress era to current day leotards. Standing ovations! *Bettina Schulte*