

Dis/Location (Fort Tryon)
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Summer months yield great possibilities for outdoor performance but it takes a skilled choreographer with an eye for theatricality to frame a panoramic outdoor work as if it were housed in a proscenium setting.

Aviva Geismar, the director of Drastic Action, and her six dancers, were able to do just that in the site-specific piece, *Dis/Location* (Fort Tryon). This is one of many aspects of the work that keeps it resonating in my memory. The free performance ran for three evenings (June 16-18, 2016). Finding the site of the performance in the sprawling Fort Tryon Park in Washington Heights, NYC was not a problem, as signage was easy to follow. Taped music integrating well with the out-of-doors greeted audience members as they descended a slight decline towards the seating areas. Entering this way allowed us to take in the lush environment – the grassy lawn later to become the stage, surrounded by huge, leafy trees, and a striking view of the George Washington Bridge looming above the placid Hudson River. As dancers were warming up, children played happily. Families were among the varied mix of audience attendees.

Ms. Geismar explained briefly the elements defining the event. The work would look at different aspects of immigrant experience, for example, the traumatic nature of losing a homeland, experiencing groundlessness and unmooring, the awkwardness of fitting in, and makeshift rituals devised to feel a new sense of belonging.

The evening consisted of two pieces. The first, entitled *Travels*, was performed by 7th-graders from the neighborhood City College Academy of the Arts. It was a culmination of a 12-week creative dance class taught by two of the Drastic Action performers. In keeping with the theme of immigration, choreography for *Travels* was generated from individual oral histories conducted between each student and a family member. The students were dressed in colorful activewear and performed to selections of World music. The all-female cast knew their paces- assembling and dispersing, playing, lifting (horseback straddles), and gesturing – yet they all seemed oddly nonplussed, which registered as a shy innocence for their age group. I would posit this had to do with a lack of time in the project cycle. How great would it be if these very young women could have been given enough time to explore, with some depth, how to inhabit and how to own their personal performance presence? The lessons of dance travel deep into emotional and physical development. School-aged kids need more dance training in their formative years. More funding, please!

When the student work was over, the young performers were used cleverly to mask from view the stage setting being crafted for the opening of the company piece, *Dis/Location* (Fort Tryon). They then cleared the space to reveal what momentarily appeared to be earth green rock-like craggy sculptures situated at the top of the incline, upstage left. As the formations began to twitch, shudder, fall over and expose body parts sneaking out hesitantly at first, we were free to suspend our disbelief, knowing of course all along that the dancers were inside. What they were each inside of were heavy canvas duffle bags, of the sort you could associate with army troops. Thus began the creative 100 uses of a duffle bag, which turned out to be a powerful metaphor for Geismar to use as a means to explore the immigrant experience.

With intensity and clarity, the choreography had the dancers fight their way out of their sacks, drag them, haul them, twist them with frustration, wear them as new clothes, push and pull them between one another trying to communicate, or as a way to test their power. When they whipped and beat them to the ground, dry earth from the lawn flew up like stage dust. There were playful moments of unison, especially in a duet between Sameena Mitta and Nickemil Concepcion, and also passages of group unison that read as mass struggle.



Sameena Mitta & Nickemil Concepcion
Photo credit: Leonard Correa

A segment meant to inter-cut the dancing occurred when Kaoru Ikeda entered to give a hyperbolic history lesson in Japanese. A dancer displayed placards in English to fill us in. Initially perceived as comic relief, Ms. Ikeda had the audience readily engaged and laughing at her over-the-top energy and inflections while gesturing like a somewhat mad professor.

But unless you were fluent in Japanese, you were clueless to the speech's meaning. Sensing the disconnect, knowing we couldn't derive her meaning and she couldn't make us understand, made the interlude bittersweet.

The piece comes to a close with a strong solo danced by Darla Stanley. Her insular body shakes, ripples, drops and rolls back up. Her joints jangle. She's distant, as if in a vacuum. Corporal detachment signals other detachments, perhaps emotional or cultural. Her feet are stuck but manage to run her backwards into a tree. Using it to hold herself up, she pushes against it and insistently tries to climb it. She fails.

What made *Dis/Location (Fort Tryon)* work so well was the articulate and performative nature of the choreography. The dancers, strong, individual, and equally able to hold the stage, all embodied a complete understanding of the material and how to use its movement language to put forth Geismar's rich choreographic ideas.



Darla Stanley
Photo credit: Leonardo Correa

