

Review of Saturday Performance of *Within a Formal Circumstance* by David Smith

“Who are you and what are you doing?” – The Search for Self in Cyberspace By David Smith

The first half of the OSU Winter Dance Concert closed with a new piece, *Within a Formal Circumstance*, created by Maree ReMalia in collaboration with her performers, Amanda Byars, Alexis Del Sol, Fiona Lundie, Rachel Riggs Leyva, Eric Nordstrom, Rashana Smith, Ariana Williams and Abigail Zbikowski. Instead of music, the piece features spoken dialog from “I Google Myself,” a poem by Mel Nichols, as well as improvised speaking parts. The performers were costumed in strangely proportioned suits or gowns of the prom dress/bridesmaid variety. The costumes, along with the crazy hairstyles and the presence on stage of folding chairs and a lectern are a clear signal that *Circumstance* is a choreographed theatrical performance instead of a traditional dance piece. And what a crazy performance it is! There is constant running, diving, convulsing, falling out of chairs, candy thrown to the floor to be gathered up and thrown down once again, and during most of this entirely unpredictable action there are bits of spoken dialog about searching for yourself on Google. Very quickly I got the sense that the characters were at best confused and at worst entirely insane.

The piece opens with Lundie and Nordstrom engaging in what appears to be a choreographed “poking contest” that devolves into chasing around the perimeter of the stage. The sequence called to mind being “poked” or “tagged” on Facebook. Next, Smith, Del Sol and Zbikowski go to the lectern, one after the other, each delivering lines from “I Google Myself” in distinctly different styles. Smith spoke with the fiery delivery of a charismatic preacher rising to a crescendo before she abruptly stops and sits down again. Del Sol’s recitation of the poem reminded me of somebody speaking vehemently on behalf of a cause, perhaps at a rally. Finally, Zbikowski’s performance was like watching an extremely intoxicated and delusional spokeswoman in a local television commercial for a carpet store.

Byars had an intriguing role. She was the only performer to remain silent throughout the

performance, yet her facial expressions and body movement served to signal emotional changes in the piece and provided a visual focal point for the many disparate actions played out around her. Her royal purple prom dress, tiara, crazy bird's nest hair gave off an aura of insanity that was enhanced by her unpredictable movements. She hikes up her dress to peer underneath as if searching for voices as other performers deliver lines from the poem. Later, she has the coy look of a prankster as she picks up her bucket and moves to center stage, suddenly throwing handfuls of candy to the floor that are immediately pounced on by Nordstrom, Lundie, Riggs Leyva and Williams. In a sequence that I especially appreciated, Zbikowski and Williams fight for possession of a folding chair and Byars mirrors this conflict with convulsions that end in her collapse to the floor.

The bucket that Byars hugs so closely is a key element in *Circumstance*. Much of the performance involves candy spilling onto the stage and performers diving to gather the candy and return it to the bucket as quickly as possible. With "I Google Myself" as the soundtrack, I saw the bucket as a metaphor for our digital personhood. In today's online universe our identity is fragmented into pieces that exist for different purposes, with different user names, in so many different electronic locations. We leave little remnants of our existence throughout cyberspace – financial information, purchase histories, travel itineraries, posts to blogs and discussion forums, which movies from Netflix we liked, our Ebay rating, updates on social networking sites. Are the pieces of candy these digital fragments of an individual? In *Circumstance*, whenever the candy is spilled on the stage floor, the same performers repeatedly stop whatever they are doing and succumb to an irresistible compulsion to gather up the candy and put it back in the bucket. Gathering these pieces of candy and putting them back in the bucket is like doing a Google search for ourselves and collecting all our digital fragments into one place.

As the performance ended I was left to ponder the challenges of controlling and maintaining an identity when our relationships are increasingly conducted through

electronic bits of binary code. As the house lights came up for intermission there was an immediate commencement of much conversation among the audience about the piece as people reviewed the crazy actions of the performers and examined the meaning of what they just saw. As a piece that was visually entertaining, crazy funny and also thought-provoking, *Within a Formal Circumstance* was a crowd-pleasing success.

Post Performance Thoughts on *Within a Formal Circumstance* by David Smith: Maree, when you were talking about the challenge of simultaneously creating art and trying to sense how an outside observer would interpret the piece you made me think of the Heisenberg uncertainty principal in physics. The Heisenberg uncertainty principal states that it is impossible to know pairs of physical properties (specifically the velocity and position of particles) with absolute precision. The more precisely you try to measure one property, the less precise will be your knowledge of the other. I asked whether there was an “uncertainty principal” for artists. The Heisenberg uncertainty principal is diametrically opposed to the concept of determinism, which holds that all phenomena are causally determined by an unbroken series of interconnected prior events. Determinism postulates that the universe can only have one possible state of existence at any given point in time. Classical physics, built upon the foundations of Newtonian laws of motion, is essentially deterministic. In classical physics, randomness is merely the manifestation of incomplete knowledge of initial conditions. Absolute knowledge of initial conditions should produce absolute certainty of outcomes. Heisenberg’s revolutionary idea was that beyond a certain point, uncertainty was not a failure of examination but a fundamental property of the universe. Applied to artistic endeavors, the uncertainty principal might mean it is impossible to be equally involved in the creative process and the critical process at the same time. Does the search for meaning in art distance the observer from the experience of art? Art exists inside a physical universe subject to the Heisenberg uncertainty principal so the principal must have some sort of analogous application to art.