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Flash Review 1, 3-20: Present
Esse Aficionado Taps the Current

By Douglas Frank
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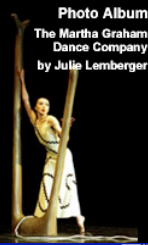
NEW YORK -- Intelligent, innovative, spontaneous and fun, Esse Aficionado offered three premieres, live music featuring intricate use of newly invented musical devices, and dancing that moved its audience at Joyce SoHo earlier this month to leap to its feet in praise of a riveting and altogether different program of work. Among the three young women who founded Esse Aficionado, Gina Graham stood out as one of those rare artists who appear to be connected to a direct current of infinite creativity.

Esse Aficionado is a collaboration of Purchase Conservatory of Dance graduates Veronica De La Rosa, Graham, and Maki Morinorue. "Esse" translates from Latin as, "to be; to be present." And an aficionado, of course, is an enthusiastic devotee of an interest or activity. As its program notes claim, "as a cutting-edge, next generation dance company, Esse Aficionado incorporates multimedia elements into its work. The synthesis of organic dance with modern technology puts this company into a contemporary context to which modern audiences can relate and respond." And that they did!

To be in a moment of creation with Gina Graham is a rare and captivating experience. This young woman is electrifying; her stage presence and her movements seem to come from a limitless source of unfathomable power (think of the Krell in "Forbidden Planet"). It is an extraordinary energy that permeates every move and every moment. She appears to exist in a zone of her own. That's not to say that Graham can't share her vision by making and performing dances with others. The premiere of "Inside the Mind of a Line," with choreography and costumes by Graham, and live new music by Michael Schneider and Kerstin Gilg, was a fantastic example of interdisciplinary collaboration -- and mostly spontaneous. Lining up, swarming, running in a multitude of patterns, 18 dancers were led by Graham in (for lack of a better word) an improvisation that didn't look "improvised." Rather, it looked "present."

The music added measurably to the effect. Schneider and Gilg created "Falling Footsteps," described in the program notes as "an interface to generate three dimensional sound-scapes in real time." Speakers were placed on the floor with their function reversed, turning them into microphones to pick up the percussive sounds of the dancers' feet. These speakers were then attached to short poles with other speakers mounted to face the audience and the dancers (so that the performers could hear what was happening too). The real-time sound was then manipulated and distorted through another device invented by Schneider, to create a unique, live composition. Taken altogether, it was brilliant. For this work, Graham and De La Rosa were joined by Jessica Jolly, Donnell Turner, Anuschka von Oppen, Georgia Teperikidou, Dania Antinori, Graceann Dorse, Rebekah J. Kennedy, Sarah Vancaster, Ivanna Wei, Katiushka Melo, Lucey Cummins, Cydnee Yamomoto, Elizabeth Pardue, Kathryn Duyn, Jenna Hunt and Lauren Thorpe.

Another premiere, "Power of Point," was a skit of a dance that poked fun at Dance/NYC, the now infamous ESPN ad, and some of those pseudo deep-and-meaningful things that modern dance detractors find so easy to ridicule. Here dancers who clearly love the art form perpetrated the ridiculing -- but with intelligence and wit. Choreography and costumes were by De La Rosa, and the dancers were De La Rosa, Graham, Pardue,



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Thorpe and Yamamoto.

The work introduced a "Presenter" named Robert Flamberg (played by Erin Ganz, costumed to look older and fatter) as the assistant vice-president of marketing for a fictitious company, "Danz/NYC." A goofy PowerPoint sales and marketing presentation, "Expanding the Vision," was central to the action. It enumerated many objectives that Danz/NYC desired. Among the stated "brand objectives" was "true passion for movement in space and time" that needed to be firmly established. Plus, the Presenter bellowed, "We want to be #1 in T&A!" (subsequently revealed to be Turning and Arabesques). Quantifying with charts and pictures that in 2002 "Plies dropped by 3%, but tendus rose by 8%," the Presenter also noted that Danz/NYC had determined an appropriate response to the offensive ESPN ad: "Without dance, they'd just be trophies." Part of the droll humor of the work was that no matter how hard the dancers tried to perform for the audience, the Presenter kept moving to keep the spotlight on him.

A third premiere, in two parts, "Episode I" and "Episode II," with choreography and costumes by Morinoue, and danced by De La Rosa, Graham and Morinoue without music, encompassed very short dances (less than a few minutes each) featuring solo work by Morinoue.

The program was rounded out with "Where I Meets Thou" (1996) with choreography and costumes by Graham, danced by Graham and De La Rosa to music from "Aquarian Rain" by Barre Phillips; and "History" (2000) with choreography and costumes by Graham, danced by Graham, De La Rosa and Morinoue. "History" excelled with new movement vocabulary -- hands touching foreheads in simultaneous rhythm with legs lifting to bound across the floor. The dancing was fiery and intense, especially by Graham, whose movements showed remarkable absence of preparation, just "GO!" It was set to music by Schneider, "Liquid Inside," manipulated spontaneously, using sounds sampled from skateboarders in a skating pool, combined with the sounds of trains.

Nick Seligson-Ross designed the fine lighting for the entire program. Once in a blue moon, the privilege to see a young dancer, with genius pulsing within, comes along at an early stage of a career. Gina Graham is one such dancer. And the performance of Esse Aficionado -- the company of Graham, De La Rosa and Morinoue -- was like invigorating heat on a cold winter's night.

The "exit music" by Steppenwolf (from 1968) was perfect -- reflecting a genuine, cutting-edge performance: "I like to dream yes, yes, right between my sound machine. On a cloud of sound I drift in the night, any place it goes is right. Goes far, flies near, to the stars away from here. Well, you don't know what we can find. Why don't you come with me, little girl, on a magic carpet ride? You don't know what we can see. Why don't you tell your dreams to me? Fantasy will set you free. Close your eyes girl, look inside girl, let the sound take you away...."

For more information on Esse Aficionado, please visit the company's [web site](#).

Douglas Frank is the executive and artistic director of the Douglas Frank Chorale. For more information, please [click here](#).

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