

the DANCE i n s i d e r

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Flash Review 1, 11-9: Scaling
Traversing Inner & Outer Landscapes with Wood & Race

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NEW YORK -- I will hold each of you accountable if Ellis Wood & Lisa Race's shared DTW Around Town program, which opened last night at the Duke, is not sold out for the remainder of its weekend run. Gather your pennies, face the insanity of 42nd St and get your soon-to-be-turkey-fed, hibernating-for-the-winter-behind to The Duke and witness a riotous explosion and celebration of perseverance in its many forms. Though Wood and Race both come from a gymnastics background and are riveting, lively performers, their styles and work are dramatically different. However, the two halves of the evening, presented by Dance Theater Workshop, side well together, bringing the audience on an exhaustive visceral passage through magnificent inner and outer landscapes.

Ellis Wood is a modern day gunslinger. Her "Funkionlust Slut" rides into town and takes no prisoners. It is confounding, disturbing, hilarious and entirely alive. The constantly shifting terrain is brilliantly constructed in how it captures, confronts, scares and startles us. Wood is a woman with a mission and an artist ready to be heard. She has taken her latest effort beyond the physical representation of emotional urgency seen in earlier works and has risked having her dancers perform their greatest fear: To speak. Since I first saw her on the DTW stage, in a Fresh Tracks we shared 6 years ago, I have been thoroughly fascinated by Wood's combustible mix of anger and vulnerability. In performance, her body often screams like an open wound. In this latest work, for Leslie Johnson, Michelle LaRue, Jennifer Phillips, Kristine Willis, and herself, she has the dancers themselves literally screaming. The dance opens with the image of rising hips and barrels through sequences of ferocious dancing bursting with raw, assertive sexuality and ripping heartbreak. There is a heartrending undercurrent running the length of this piece, even when Wood zanily stumbles through a solo declaring "I want it." Of the dancers other than Wood, Phillips manages the heartbreaking awkwardness best, shifting from exposed waif who offers herself "for free" to hearty, self-declared "hot" vamp, with ease.

Wood's work over the past two years on the Gender Project, which seeks to heighten awareness of how women dance artists are treated differently from their male counterparts, has visibly heightened her determination to be heard and to ensure that other women are heard as well. The ferocity of "Funkionslust Slut" seems a direct response to what Wood calls the "overwhelming devastation of her experience" observing the differences in conditions between men and women in the dance world. Personally, she refers to the examples present in her own life. Her mother started dancing at five, her father at 25. When both were with the Graham company, her mother was a member of the chorus, her father a soloist and rehearsal director. When they left Graham he was offered five prestigious positions in dance around the world, while she was offered nothing. When they started the dance program at the University of California at Berkeley, it was four years before she could get paid half of his salary. It's frightening.