

dance

Elemental Women

Bringing the timeless up to date

by **Deborah Jowitt**

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It's been far too long since I last saw a work by Ellis Wood. My goodness, she's been busy; her performances at various New York venues, at festivals abroad, and in residencies at universities attest to the lusty appeal of her choreography and her own performing. Wood was born to dance. She's the offspring of two former members of Martha Graham's company, Marni Thomas and David Wood; her sister Raegan danced with Paul Taylor's company. I've seen photos of the Wood girls as children, clad in silky tunics and skipping à la Isadora at Berkeley's onetime Duncan school, Temple of the Wings. Ellis Wood was also a gymnast.



From Ellis Wood Dance's "Hurricane Flora: Inferno"

Photo by Julieta Cervantes

Ellis Wood Dance

Joyce Soho

November 9 through 12

I'm tempted to suggest that her heritage—a blend of discipline, passion, and freedom—shows in her work, but that would be too easy. She's her own woman, and a 2004 solo, *Stella* (an addition to her Joyce Soho program the night I attended), shows who that woman is. Wood, small and strong, dances as if she's furiously determined to reach out and grab as much of the world as her arms can encompass, and, if that fails, to seduce it. She can look vulnerable, even demure. What a pretty woman, you think, as she begins *Stella*, calm in her black, crushed velvet dress, and Rufus Wainwright's recorded voice starts lamenting, "Oh, what a world we live in." But she's up to Wainwright's dark vision of a trendy, speeded-up society, with her angry stances, stripper hips, mobile face, grasping arms. Staying mostly in one spot, lit by Julie Ana Dobo, she's the center of her own precisely calculated whirlwind. I thought she'd self-destruct if her movements got any bigger or any greedier. But no, she reins herself back down to her more peaceful beginning. Just don't anyone strike a match.

This controlled volatility informs her engrossing *Hurricane Flora: Inferno*. Two of its four sections, "Air" and "Earth," were premiered at Dance Theater Workshop in 2004. Now she's added "Fire" and "Water." The five women who perform it (Loren Davidson, Amy Knauff, Cynthia Koppe, Candice Schnurr, and Kristine Willis) offer no simple visualizations of the four elements. While composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, accompanying his previously recorded tracks on violin, goads them on with hints of atmosphere, sweet melodies, and fiercer chugging rhythms, the performers move through a kind of sensual nature rite than mingles the tribal with the personal, the impulsive with the pre-ordained.

Wood construes air as wind. The women stagger out of their initial formation as if they were no more securely rooted than tumbleweed. Their whispering voices remind you of the play of breezes. Koppe yearns toward one of four switched-on standing fans with streamers attached; her friends have to hold her back.

Schnurr stands before another fan, inhaling. Davidson blows at Schnurr's chest, and Koppe blows into her mouth. And throughout, they dance—whipping their legs around, spinning, stopping, and beginning again as gales subside and start up. Ed Rawlings's video projections back "Air" with images of clouds, leaves blowing on a street, wavy lines like billowing silk, a branch in the rain.

For "Fire," Wood brings on the red. It must be her favorite color, judging from her *Timeless Red* in 1998 and the lengths of scarlet fabric that 20 red-clad female dancers draped this past August from a Lower Manhattan balcony in her *Fire on Wall Street*. One long swatch of red cloth seems to stand for passion, for the fire within. Some of the women strip to their briefs, hang their dresses on the hooks suspended from wires that I've been wondering about since the dance began, and reappear clothed in red tulle. At one point, Willis, wearing a dress with a yards-long train of red fabric, advances toward a corner, and Koppe, seated, draws out the cloth until it becomes both a trail anchoring Willis to the earth and something she is either extruding or emerging from. In the end, Willis is buried in her own flaming gown.

The women wear what look like mossy bark tunics for "Earth." I swear I can smell them. They carry big flat baskets of flowers and scrap with one another playfully—cave women with excellent dance techniques. Egged on by Davidson, they go wild with the blooms, hurling their floral hurricane until the floor is carpeted with bright fragrance. Rawlings segues into videos of melting ice floes and sparkles on water, and Roumain into what sound like vibes, while the women divest themselves of their rough outfits. In this watery flow, they roll Schnurr across and over their own rolling and tumbling bodies. The final image is of Knauff carrying Schnurr, rocking her as the others gaze into the waves.

The inferno of Wood's title seems to be a crucible for forging the image of women as a powerful sisterhood. They don't posture or sentimentalize but simply dance full out together—voluptuous, tender, fiery.

You can catch Ellis Wood's company at Dance New Amsterdam in April 2007.