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photo: Lisa Greenfield design: Ellen Joubert Associates

ELLIS
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PRESS KIT – REVIEWS

dance

Elemental Women

Bringing the timeless up to date

by **Deborah Jowitt**

November 28th, 2006 1:07 PM

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.

THE Arts

The New York Times

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2004

DANCE REVIEW

Forces of Order And Disorder Come Alive

By JACK ANDERSON

Ellis Wood's "Hurricane Flora" was admirably named, admirably danced. Storms of motion swept through this new two-part piece, which the choreographer's troupe, Ellis Wood Dance, offered on Friday night at Dance Theater Workshop. And flowers were caught up in the tempests.

A scene called "Air" opened the work, which Ms. Wood choreographed in collaboration with its cast of women. People twisted, turned and toppled over to solemn sounds of electric violin composed and played by Daniel Bernard Roumain. The rushing bodies could easily have been winds. Projected video images by Ed Rawlings showed ominous dark spots drifting across a sky and debris blowing through a city street.

"Earth," the second episode, began with women carrying large baskets of flowers. But harmonious floral ar-

rangements and choreographic groupings were soon shattered as dancers dashed back and forth and raced madly in circles. They threw flowers about and, in a final frenzy, pelted the audience with them. This hurricane seemed unstoppable.

Throughout the program, the admirably controlled dancers created

'Hurricane Flora'

Dance Theater Workshop

the illusion that forces beyond their control were haunting them. In "Stella," a solo, Ms. Wood made her arms and legs battle the air with manic agitation. The solo ended with one of the evening's rare moments of calm.

But "Timeless Red," a group piece, was a total maelstrom. A malevolently gesturing woman tried to dominate other women, making them either inert or perpetually dithering. Everyone appeared to be trapped in compulsive actions.

Although Ms. Wood has been trained in modern dance, theatergoers from the Middle Ages might say she was depicting people possessed by spirits or even demons. Then they'd summon an exorcist. Ms. Wood's dances are choreographically strong and emotionally scary.

the DANCE i n s i d e r

September 23, 2005

Flash Review Journal, 9-23: Southern California Solution
Ellis off the Island, and Other Tales from "America's Finest City"

By Brian Schaefer
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SAN DIEGO -- Over 75 performance ensembles and studios helped the Celebrate Dance Festival mark its tenth anniversary over the last weekend in August, bringing everything from strict Vaganova ballet to solid hip-hop, salsa and tango to jazz and tap, Irish step dancing to Balinese dance, and all varieties of modern dance -- from local groups to New York export Ellis Wood -- to Balboa Park. Presented by Eveoke Dance Theater, the festival boasted workshops and demonstrations, several outdoor stages, and endless performances in the large Casa del Prado Theatre. And it was all free.

San Diego hosts four or five strong modern dance companies that produce some solid, intriguing, and enjoyable work. The problem with having so few established companies, however, is that in the course of a season, one might catch the same piece several times. Repeated viewings can be effective and valuable with the right work, but this scarcity of the local scene also makes the arrival of something new and fresh, like the festival offering from Ellis Wood Dance, much appreciated.

The Ellis Wood hour (each company at the festival performed for a maximum of 60 minutes) began with "Lila Goes Down," a fierce work, set to music by punk band Four Hero, that exploded with flying limbs and flying bodies. The dancers of the all-female company used their hair as weapons, whipping it in all directions while their bodies undulated in unison. The non-stop energy channeled something between an all-night rave and an all-night orgy.

"Lila Goes Down," the choreographer said from the stage before the next piece, is a "blast of female energy, power, and sensuality," intended to depict women as strong and in control of their bodies and their lives.

I was shocked -- and thrilled -- to see the choreographer explain her work.

The previous weekend I'd brought my mother to a dance performance. She enjoyed the show but said she wished that an explanation had been available to assist the audience in interpreting the work. My mom is a very intelligent woman. She can create and find her own meaning in art. But she doesn't always want to. If a choreographer is trying to say something, she would like to have at least a hint about what it is. Some insist that dance is what one makes it, that there is no fixed definition, no one right way to see it, no single story that is told. They hold that each person will view dance differently, based on her or his own personal experiences, and that every interpretation is a correct interpretation. This argument is completely valid. Yet I also find that I become more engaged with dance that comes with descriptions and explanations of context, history, and intention. This does not prevent one from creating a personal account of what was seen; yet it can inform the way the dance is viewed. More important, it makes the dance accessible for those not used to finding meaning in abstract art, particularly in dance. My mom -- who has grown to be a fan of modern dance -- would have valued the insight Wood provided to her work. It didn't take the mystery away. Rather, it was as though the choreographer were letting the audience in on a secret, and we were more closely connected as a result.

Next Wood presented an excerpt from a larger work-in-progress, "Hurricane Flow," which will ultimately consist of four solos representing four elements: air, fire, earth, and water. The Fire solo, created for the festival, was performed by the sultry Christine Willis. Appropriately dressed all in red, Willis embodied a flame -- bouncing softly

on the floor, spinning frantically on her feet, pulling violently at her long hair, and sinking back to the floor, all to a steady hypnotic beat, before extinguishing herself with exhaustion.

The third piece presented by the company was the first eight minutes of a 60-minute work, "Pignut," named after a savory hickory treat found in the eastern United States. The Dance, Wood said, is a "female 'Lord of the Flies,'" her take on the 1954 William Golding novel. Taking the stage once again, this time prior to the piece's presentation, Wood described it as a commentary on what happens to a society that is headed in the wrong direction. The pignuts -- which sat in a pile on stage -- represented, she said, that which pulls out the worst in human nature. Each performer who encounters the pignut reacts to it in a different way and for each one, it brings out a deeper, darker side. The dancers brought their own thoughts and meaning to the concept. With this knowledge in hand, the ensuing piece became that much more personal. No longer were we watching dancers acting out a story; we were seeing these women actually reveal their own dark sides.

Dressed in black, the women fought for possession of the pignuts, and, upon gaining it, used the newfound power to subjugate the others. Greed and jealousy infused the piece, and an air of panic and despair hung over the stage. Desperation led to frantic struggles, and mistrust quickly divided the ensemble, leaving each woman on her own. What made the movement effective in conveying these ideas was that the struggles did not seem choreographed. The women fighting for the pignuts really fought for them, and those trying to keep them away tried in vain to honestly keep them away. These were not mere positions and placements the dancers were told to hit -- a true confrontation appeared to be taking place.

Finally, the company presented "Island Solutions," a work commissioned by a theater in Germany to be a site-specific piece for that theater. Relocating a site-specific work to a different site essentially makes an entirely new work. The movement, costuming, and lighting allowed the piece to hold its own in this San Diego space, yet clearly something was lost in the transfer. Projecting from a single hand-held stage light, a beam created mysterious tones with huge shadows on the back of the stage which the dancers played with in their structured improvisations, moving toward and away from it, basking in the light and then fleeing from it as if to escape or hide. The title was given by the commissioning theater and Wood interpreted it by seeing each of her dancers as distinct and independent islands. The challenge, then, was to allow for the individuality of each dancer to come out while bringing them all together in a cohesive whole, thus the solution to the problem of the islands. Part of Wood's solution to this challenge was in the costumes. Each dancer contributed creative input into her costume, submitting certain styles, colors, and fabrics to the designer so that each outfit emerged as an elaborate, individualized construction which, when the ensemble came together as a group, conveyed quite the colorful picture.

Ellis Wood Dance's trip across the States was a welcome addition to Celebrate Dance. The troupe joined a collection of San Diego-based companies which presented provocative and polished performances featuring some very talented dancers. San Diego Dance Theater bid farewell to longtime (20 years!) member Faith Jensen-Ismay with a tender solo on a stool. Jensen-Ismay left the company to pursue her own work with her Mojalet Dance Collective, which here presented "Movin' On," an hour-long look at the life of Joe Tezak, a champion wrestler who suffered a freak spinal cord injury which left him wheelchair-bound. Tezak performed in his wheelchair in several touching duets.

Butterworth Dance Company presented, among several other pieces, "Binary," a stunning duet between Rayna Stohl and James Elzy, and "Skewed," a take on Bach that alternated between traditional interpretation of the music and silly comic gestures. A highlight of the last day of the festival was McCaleb Dance's "La Rumorosa," a haunting work demonstrating incredible control, strength, and endurance from the four remarkable dancers. It is a piece I have seen several times this year, yet one that is endlessly fascinating, becoming more polished with each performance. The dancers leap into each other's arms without warning, fling themselves to the ground, and climb all over each other, but all with the force of a whisper. It is an intense, patient work that commands the audience and owns the stage. It is one of the most engaging works of dance I have ever seen.

The festival brought dance of every kind to San Diego free of charge. Ellis Wood jumped up on stage to talk to the audience about her inspiration for her work and the processes she used to create it. Celebrate Dance was successful not only because of the mere magnitude of the production or the sheer number of groups presented or even the quality of the dance. Rather, it was successful because it made dance accessible. Financially accessible, intellectually accessible, and emotionally accessible. The number of people in attendance suggested that people really want to see dance and love to watch it. Maybe we just need to make it a little easier.

Wood's Indefatigable Women

Ellis Wood Dance
Dance Place
Washington, DC
Saturday, June 25, 2005

by Lisa Traiger
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Ellis Wood's dances unspool like enigmatic short stories—the gothic horror tales of Shirley Jackson, for example, or the proto-feminist treatise of Tillie Olsen come to mind. While Wood's works are narrative-less and thankfully eschew spoken word, she still infuses a great deal of dramatic action and relational discord into her pieces, primarily through the active participation and expression of her six indomitable dancers. What the works ultimately mean and the choreographer intended, though, well that's another story.

New Yorker Wood, who directs her consciously all-female Ellis Wood Dance, carries within her a modern dance provenance linking her back to one of our greatest feminine and feminist American dance icons, Martha Graham. Wood's parents, Marni and David Wood, were Graham dancers in the 1960s, who together later went on to found the dance department at University of California Berkeley, where Wood was trained.

But Wood's dancers are by no means Grahassettes, less distinct copies of the original. They're real women: sensual, sexy, provocative, tough as nails, fearless. They relish the physical—Wood (a one-time gymnast) pushes her dancers hard to some technical boundaries—and in a work like the 10-minute program opener "Lila Goes Fast" the women get caught up in the sheer abandon of whipping kicks, snapping heads, full-throttled catches, falls and off-kilter balances. As an opener, "Lila Goes Fast" serves as a quick tutorial into Wood's sensibility: her women are strong, good-looking and assertive—like modern-day sorceresses who won't take no for an answer. In earlier centuries, no doubt, they would have been burned at the stake for heresy.

A Lord of the Flies scenario influences Pignut, a new work that explores the darker side of human nature. These five women are rawly aggressive in their quest to rule the roost, in this case a pile of nuts. They tremble uncontrollably, trying to grasp a hold of the most nuts. Atavistic, at times nearly orgiastic, beneath Jessica Marchant's shadowy lighting, the women are mesmerizingly fierce, their faces as dramatically active as their bodies are physical. Grimaces, sneers, gasps and silent groans punctuate this seething cauldron of bodies all bent on capturing the most, winning, overcoming their co-competitors. It's a grueling study, approached with breathless abandon.

Of Wood's earlier group works, "Timeless Red" attracted attention for its striking visual imagery. Wood, visibly pregnant and clad in brilliant red sequins and a full-length ruby skirt, a feathered plume decorating her backside, performs as a demoness on a high black platform, while a dancer downstage in red tulle serenely practices yoga poses and headstands. Between these two dichotomies, a trio of women resist and acquiesce to Wood's puppet-mistress, her arms a swirl, her index finger dramatically beckoning, her face a mobile mask of simmering rage and control. The trio, semi-robotic, favors simple gestural repetition in this intriguing yet enigmatic study of power and submission.

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Marchant's innovative lighting became an integral part of "Island Solutions," originally choreographed as a site-specific work in Dresden, Germany's Palucca Schule earlier this year. At Dance Place, a pair of women begin in complete darkness on bare risers in the audience. Lit by flashlights and a portable hand-held stage lamp, they writhe and undulate, eyes semi-closed as if awash in a meditative trance. As they make their way to the stage other dancers fill the barren cinderblock space. One massive group (Dance Place students) oozes from the wings belly-crawling like part of some preternatural Dawn of the Dead horror flick. Darkly atmospheric, filled with discordant body images—angular limbs, spastic trembles, oozing ripples of bare-midribs, and dark-eyed, deeply meaningful looks—the work remains enigmatic, a cipher. And that's true for much of Ms. Wood's output; her choreographic expertise lends to clearly purposeful stage pictures, but reading them is often an exercise in futility. With a vivid imagination and a writerly perspective on choreography, much happens on Wood's stage; but it's near-impossible to know what it all means. For the moment, the big picture is beyond reach for viewers, if not for Woods.

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Monday, June 27, 2005

Dance

Ellis Wood, Dancing in the Dark



Ellis Wood Dance performed aggressive works from "the dark side" Saturday at Dance Place. (By Lois Greenfield)

Before Saturday night's Dance Place performance, choreographer Ellis Wood told the audience she was an artist who "embraced the dark side." She meant it. Through four works, Ellis Wood Dance careened through an array of dramatic, aggressive dancing.

In "Island Solutions," in which Dance Place's Repertory Class appeared alongside the six company dancers, Wood ingeniously turns light toward previously unseen spaces, literally. Individual dancers took turns carrying a hand-held light through the audience and the stage, focusing on various duets and solos, and finally a large group, which emerged slithering on their bellies from beneath a black curtain on one side of the stage. Other dancers cavorted while wielding heavy-duty flashlights, jerking spasmodically with a club-dancing undercurrent to their movement.

"Pignut" found Wood's dancers competing for a pile of nuts. The work developed the theme of competition quickly, but pounded in the same place for too long. But Wood's partnering -- her dancers are very strong women -- continually produced new ways (and new body parts) with which each dancer could keep another from attaining her goal: One woman scuttled another across the stage, rolling her torso between her feet; another pair linked arms around each other's waists, flipping repeatedly, their legs alternately flying in arcs like a human amusement park ride.

The program also included "Timeless Red," where a maniacal Wood, in a red velvet dress with a peacock-feather bustle, conjures the movements of the other dancers, and the short, sexually savvy "Lila Goes Fast."

-- Clare Croft

MAGAZINE
DANCE

MARCH 2005



Timeless Red: Ellis Wood (left) as a Victorian go-go dancer.

ELLIS WOOD DANCE
DANCE THEATER WORKSHOP,
NEW YORK, NY
NOVEMBER 17-20, 2004
Reviewed by Susan Yung

Ellis Wood's two-part premiere, *Hurricane Flora*, is a riotous, satisfying, female *Lord of the Flies*. One reason is the visceral desperation, the barely contained abandon, in Wood's choreography. Energy explodes from torsos, courses through limbs, and shoots out fingers splayed, reflexively, like a child's. Another reason is the work's operatic *tanztheater* melodrama, which pitted the dancers against one another.

The first part, "Air," began hauntingly, with eight women scattered around the stage, whispering urgently to themselves. A tableau worthy of Delacroix followed—Leslie Johnson

swept into an arabesque at the center of the clustered group, while some pulled her forward and others restrained her. Johnson confronted a persistent demon, at one point invoking a higher authority as she knelt with one leg extended high to the side. Composer/violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain accompanied recorded tracks of himself in music that moved through repeated, modulated phrases, doleful sonorities, and chugging funk, setting the tempo and mood.

In "Earth," six dancers carried trays of cut flowers that emitted a sickly sweet scent. Jennifer Phillips and Claire Benton paused to sniff their posies, then swooned and collapsed. The six others cradled their bouquets and waddled on their rears to form a line, each occupying a circle of light. Then the women became increasingly feral, stepping on others like conquests and walking on all fours bearing riders on their backs. They broke into two groups, each team handling Phillips and Benton like battering rams, dropping them face first into piles

of flowers. The piece ended with the cast hurling fistfuls of flowers toward the audience; eventually the air was thick with flying flora, some of which reached the back of the house.

Also on the bill were *Timeless Red*, a mystifying piece from 1998 that featured Wood as a taunting Victorian go-go dancer, plus a yogi and three fierce women with chairs. This work, with its ear-splitting score, merely diluted the impact of the premiere. Wood also danced a solo, *Stella*, which demonstrated her muscular and linear prowess in deep pliés and stretched limbs and used suspended relevés as fulcrum-like, kinetic punctuation.

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www.wooddance.net

Lois Greenfield

the DANCE i n s i d e r

Flash Review 2, 11-24: Hurricane Ellis
Wood Storms Manhattan

By Maura Nguyen Donohue
Copyright 2004 Maura Nguyen Donohue

NEW YORK -- Ellis Wood is a tempest. Her recent premiere, "Hurricane Flora," seen this past weekend at Dance Theater Workshop, where I am a member of the board, pounds like a furious gale. Nine women toss themselves through the theater with thrilling virtuosity and a seething sensuality, shifting quickly from wounded waif to raging banshee. Wood's choreography is both rant and rapture, moving in a moment from exposed to authoritative.

"Hurricane Flora" is performed in two rousing sections, "Air" and "Earth." "Air" begins with eight dancers, Julie Alexander, Lauren Beale, Claire Benton, Leslie Johnson, Samantha Lazzaro, Jennifer Philips, Gayla Marie Stiles and Kristine Willis, whispering and gasping in the dark. I have to admit that the sight of a large group of women dressed in variations on the same costume causes me to panic. It just looks too much like way too many unfortunate college dance works. (Granted any project titled "Mandance" still ranks higher on my cringe-o-meter than my fear of all-collegiate ensembles.) Of course, Wood surpasses these initial superficial trappings with demanding choreography and a company of determined dancers. And in view of today's dance making economy, not to mention the choreographer's additional duties as a new mom, it is a pretty impressive feat that she can manage and maintain such a large group.

Johnson leads the group, capturing Wood's style of awkward gestures, rapid-fire direction and balance changes and raw-ness with complete confidence. She balances upon her left knee as she develops her right leg up and away from her torso before falling back like the gently drifting leaves projected on the back screen. Later in the work as she inaudibly pleads in frantic, manic twitches the feeling is so painful and lonely, like those dreams in which your best friend betrays you, I find myself emotionally overpowered and openly weeping. It came suddenly in the moment after I dropped my critical examination of the overall composition and zoomed in on Johnson. Wood shifts skillfully here, taking us from an active group sequence into a kind of choreographic zoom shot of one woman's anguish.

"Earth" begins with six dancers, each holding a large platter covered in flowers. Daniel Bernard Roumain, who has been accompanying his own recorded compositions with live violin, shifts into an Arabian scale. Coupled with the women's slowly opening legs the second section slowly wafts over you like an exotic perfume. Philips and Benton are held and tossed between the others. They are alternately dangled over the flowerbeds, trampled and caressed. The dance reaches a feverish pitch in a sumptuous bout of anarchy as the dancers finally let the flowers fly. They throw them at one another and in a whirlwind storm spew them out into the audience. Then in a flash of light and quiet, as in the aftermath of a tornado, the dance ends.

Wood pushes her dancers to emotionally charged places. Her familiar vocabulary of tossed back heads and reaching arms perfectly embodies the uneasy terrain between release and recklessness. Her exhaustive choreography, filled with pointed feet, legs kicked high and falling bodies demands athleticism and great technical skill. She's working in a clear arena of dance that sometimes gets tinged by the performers with a little too much jazziness. But those who get what she's getting at can capture the sexuality and forcefulness in her work without the cliché. Beale in particular stands out in the ensemble.

The program also included "Stella," a gorgeous solo for Wood, and an older group work, "Timeless Red." In "Stella" Wood ripples through incarnations of playfulness with the same audacity I remember from when I saw her first solo in DTW's "Fresh Tracks" almost 10 years ago, but with a more seasoned assuredness. I decide during this luscious solo that she's my favorite dancer in the world to watch. Okay, it's usually Desmond Richardson, but every couple years I catch up with Wood again and find myself floored. Seeing the progression from the older "Timeless Red" to the new "Hurricane Flora" I see her strengthening skill as a choreographer and would expect, would insist even, that her work reaches wider audiences in the coming years but I still find her juiciest dances are served up solo.

Maura Nguyen Donohue is artistic director of Maura Nguyen Donohue/In Mixed Company.

BACK STAGE

December 10, 2004

REVIEWS • Dance

Ellis Wood Dance

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sagolla

Presented by and at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W. 19 St., NYC, Nov. 17-20.

Dancer-choreographer **Ellis Wood** exudes an androgynous kinesthetic personality that's stylish and endearing. In her solo "Stella," the highlight of the evening of her choreography presented at Dance Theater Workshop, Wood punches at the air like a boxing champ, shifts her weight back and forth as speedily as a pro basketball player, kicks like a Rockette, undulates her midsection like an MTV babe, grins with pixieish glee, and jumps with the perky pep of a cheerleader. Yet despite the athletic uptempo kinetics of the dancing, the solo leaves behind a feeling of sadness—probably because it's too short. Performed to music by **Rufus Wainwright**—with lyrics lamenting a

life lived "on a fast train," always traveling—the dance is less than five minutes long, which is time enough for Wood to bewitch us with her physical prowess and girlish warmth. But just when we feel we've gotten to know her, she plants her legs in a simple stance, smiles sweetly, and raises an arm, as if to wave goodbye. The abrupt ending comes as a surprise and suddenly we're sad to see her go.

In "Air," the first portion of her new ensemble work "Hurricane Flora," Wood employs her signature highly physical style of choreographic expression to send dancers charging about the stage in abstract representations of life's little annoyances, acting upon an "Everywoman" soloist. Sometimes they look like bugs or burps or blips of things that tickle you, gnaw at you, or become an irritating itch. Sometimes they come together and offer support. We're left with the idea that it's ultimately our choice. We can let these forces defeat us or we can commandeer them to bolster our journey through life. The work's second section, "Earth," is choreographically

repetitious, yet ends with a wonderfully cathartic frenzy of action in which fresh flowers are hurled about the stage, food-fight-like, in a scene of pure hysteria.

Wood's program also included "Timeless Red," a quintet in which minimalist patterns of choreography are carefully constructed then exploded, in conveyance of dramatic notions of dominance and rebellion.

dance

Raw Meat

Steel Traps and Soft Landings

by Deborah Jowitt

The world of Lisa Race keeps tilting. Maybe it's because in her pieces dancers are liable to wheel between being right side up and upside down. Yet nothing looks effortful; their joints are lined with plush. Race's new *Social Climb*, presented by Dance Theater Workshop last month at the Duke on a shared program with Ellis Wood, involves struggle, but no tension. "What could be better than hiking?" asks Paul Matteson. Immediately, his companions—Anna Sofia Kallinikidou, Jennifer Nugent, and Mark Stuver—turn themselves into a peak for him to scale, and the dance becomes a long, fluid process of sliding and vaulting over one another, of climbing, toppling, and being caught. Against Michael Wall's bright score, the performers speak of other obstacles and fears. I'm caught up in the beauty and imaginativeness of the evolving formations; the body you least expect to see surface spurts up from the group in a shape you never expected to see. I do sometimes feel that Race and the dancers get on a roll—unable to stop, or punctuate, or veer in a new direction—drunk on momentum, sating us with loveliness.

Wood is not about loveliness. The Germanic edge to her memorable premiere's title, *Funktionlust Slut*, answers the Kurt Weill echoes in Daniel Bernard Roumain's now sweet, now ominous music. This is one ferocious piece. Women lie flat on their faces on the floor, stick their rumps up in the air, and inch along. "It's no problem; I can do this," says one of them about the physical rigors that life (and Wood) demands of them. Leslie Johnson, Jennifer Phillips, Michelle LaRue, and Wood plunge, stumble, cry out, and laugh hysterically. Phillips futilely thrashes her arms around. She, Johnson, and LaRue slip out of their Naoka Nagata duds and leave the stage in their panties while Wood works herself into a lather of drastic, hurtling movement and stark pauses. "I want it!" she tells us. "I have a fire in my house. I'm hot." She makes the words sound like a hopeful boast. And as if to convince themselves of their sexiness, the others crawl back in and start curling their mouths around words, threatening to suck them dry.

The New York Times

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DANCE REVIEW

Striving for Equity in Things Like Mountain Climbing

By JENNIFER DUNNING

It was "if only" time on Thursday night at the Duke on 42nd Street when Ellis Wood and Lisa Race presented new and recent works that came frustratingly close to their apparent goals.

Ms. Wood's ambitious new "Funkionslust Slut," a dance for five women set to propulsively atmospheric

music by Daniel Bernard Roumain, was inspired by the inequities faced today by female choreographers and performers in modern dance and ballet. Ms. Wood and her feisty dancers (Leslie Johnson, Michelle LaRue, Jennifer Phillips and Kristine Willis), dressed in sturdy, sexy practice clothes designed by Naoko Nagata, surged through the dance and text with unflagging energy. But they were surprisingly unconvincing

most of the time.

Two segments stood out, suggesting how powerful and individual "Funkionslust Slut" could have been. One was a touching solo performed by Ms. Wood, entirely believable as a woman becoming almost giddy as she realizes that she really does "want it, now" and can say that at last. The other was a stunning sudden shift from exhilarating power to cringing fear, as a woman ex-

claims "I'm free!," then crumples. "You don't have to pay me," she says.

Ms. Race's "Social Climb," a dance for four bounding young friends, juxtaposed the heroic communal physicality of mountain climbing with the petty everyday life and its demands. The movement and Michael Wall's music were mostly luscious and billowy. Anna Sofia Kalinikidou's story about an interrupted honeymoon was funny and chilling.

But Ms. Race never quite integrated the two worlds, and "Social Climb" petered out before its end. The juicy performing of the cast, which also included Paul Matteson, Jennifer Nugent and Mark Stuver, was a continuing delight.

The program also included the goofy, rubber-bodied "Three Wishes," choreographed and performed by Ms. Race to an equally nutty song by Amy Denio.

the DANCE i n s i d e r

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

By Maura Nguyen Donohue
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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 "Funkionslust 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.

September 16, 1999

DANCE REVIEW; Urgency as a Foil for Meditation in an Obscure Myth

By JACK ANDERSON

The first part of "Home for the Naked" was called "Home" and its second and final scene was called "Naked." But no one ever appeared nude. And it was hard to guess what home was supposed to be for the restless people in this hourlong work, which Ellis Wood presented on Tuesday night as part of the Carnival series at Dance Theater Workshop.

Watching the production was like listening to impassioned conversations in a foreign language. But because of the intensity of Ms. Wood's choreography and the conviction of her dancers, the mysterious body language seemed always on the verge of comprehensibility. Its emotional urgency was certainly inescapable.

Daniel Stebbins's set included boulderlike shapes on which dancers stood or sat and hanging panels adorned with tangled lines resembling branches. Scott Westerfeld's taped score contrasted spurts of insistent instrumental sounds with sustained vocal phrases.

Ms. Wood's choreography had its own contrasts. There was an abundance of brusque forceful movement for six women (Melanie Aceto, Monica Bill Barnes, Wendy Blum, Jennifer Phillips, Raegan Wood Sanders and the choreographer). Unlike these vibrant figures, Laurence Rawlins, the one man in the cast, seemed almost spectral, moving in slow motion as if in a trance. Yet he was by no means a feeble presence, for near the end of the piece he appeared to heal a dancer by pouring water from a bowl on her.

If the women were people committed to vigorous action, Mr. Rawlins could have been a meditative penitent or mystic. Their choreographic interactions might well have been episodes from an unfamiliar myth. And if one did not know who the characters were, Ms. Wood made sure that one realized that their actions were important.

Her production will be repeated next Thursday, on Sept. 24, and on Oct. 2 and 3 at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea.

the village VOICE

March 3, 1998

Womanstrength

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

ELLIS WOOD (playing this Saturday and Sunday in DTW's Carnival series) was, like Johnson, a gymnast, but she's danced from babyhood (her parents, Marnie Thomas and David Wood, performed with Graham). She moves like a healthy young animal—springy, with strong legs and a long back that ripples like a cat's when she crawls on all fours. Her choreography combines athleticism and impulsiveness. But she's also dramatic; her face tells tales. In *After Darkness*, she seduces a semi-circle of lightbulbs into glowing by stroking them or dancing hotly among them. At the end, all go out, but the central one—the one she carried in under her dress—lights up. Clear action, fuzzy symbolism. She ends an interestingly weird duet, *In Shadow*, to terrific Lou Reed songs, by kneeling on the back of her crouching friend (Wendy Blum) and giving us a charming smile.

Wood's works are charged with a drama that's fascinating but elusive. *Grace*, dedicated to her mother, and *Timeless Red*, dedicated to her father, have the kind of authenticity that comes when choreographers plumb their own experience, but Wood treads a rickety line between the obscure and the too

explicit. In *Grace* (performed by Wood, her sister Reagan Wood Saunders, Blum, and Molly Rabinowitz), loving playfulness turns into impatience and desperation. A lesson in calm given by one sister (perhaps representing a parent) also involves the pointing of imaginary guns. In *Timeless Red*, certain images stand out. Blum, Yasmeen Godder, and Jennifer A. Philips sit on chairs, quietly shaking their heads. Rabinowitz, in a red wrapper, stands on her head for what seems like an eternity. Marisa Lopez, atop a box in a long red dress, captures Philips when she ventures too near and shakes her head for her. Wood's pieces are eventful. She's telling juicy stories, but they leave me shaking *my* head.