

'Not About Iraq'

Choreography/Direction by Victoria Marks

by Carmel Morgan

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Victoria Marks' "Not About Iraq," which was performed at Dance Place in Washington, DC, on April 5, borrows its title from Neil Greenberg's "Not About AIDS Dance." Despite its title, Marks' work is indeed about Iraq. At the same time, it's about things larger than simply Iraq. It's a collection of dances that is driven, says Marks, by the question, "What is my civic responsibility as an artist?" Marks, a professor of choreography in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, views dance as "a laboratory for understanding the way we interpret events in the world, as we struggle to find our right actions in it."

The performance was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Performance Residency Program of the National Performance Network (NPN). Dance Place is a partner of NPN, a group of cultural organizers and artists that facilitates the practice and public experience of performing arts across the United States through commissions, residencies, culture-centered community projects, and other activities.

"Not About Iraq" featured five Los Angeles-based performers, including Marks, and also two guest artists from the DC area, Connie L. Fink and Vincent E. Thomas. Marks plays a sort of narrator role, a role that is shared by Taisha Paggett, who opens and closes the piece with poignant solo material.

As "Not About Iraq" begins, Paggett calls the lighting cue – "Lights up" – and starts to slowly dance. Seated in the theater's front row, Marks comments, "This is so beautiful," and then more forcefully, "Isn't this beautiful?" and "This is the truth." She continues to spew zippy comments, "This is sexy," "This is about power: mine," and "Everything is OK." Paggett eventually collapses to the floor, flattened in a heap. Marks repeats madly,

"Everything is OK." It becomes an incantation. At one point Marks leans over and instills this "truth" in Paggett's ear. "This is silence," she later screams to the deafening whir of helicopter blades. Thus the stage is set for a series of dances that gently coax us to question not only the conflict in Iraq but also the truth of various judgments by which we are bombarded day after day.

Paggett continues Marks' "This is" statements. "This is looking away," she explains, turning her head. "This is looking at you," she says, staring directly at the audience, inviting us to examine our own indifference.

The remaining dancers first take to the stage in a group section, trotting and



Taisha Paggett
in "Not About Iraq"
Photo © Reed Hutchinson

posing, ignoring the horror of Paggett's recurring collapses. To the count of 1-2-3-4, the dancers are cheerleaders flashing vacuous smiles, empty-headed go-go dancers, or mindlessly marching soldiers. Bodies begin to roll across the stage. Marks and others step over them nonchalantly. In a gorgeous duet, one woman rolls and rolls, and another tries to stop her, grabbing her around the waist and attempting to cover her body. The momentum is too great, and the two

become entangled, forming a single rolling mass until they disengage.

One strength of "Not About Iraq" is that it isn't preachy. Another plus is that it's comprehensible. There's no hitting one over the head with any particular political point of view, nor is the piece so abstract that one is completely lost as to its message. Instead, "Not About Iraq" succeeds in striking a delicate balance – making a statement by raising concerns and allowing audience members to provide their own personal meaning. The real gift of Marks' choreography is this thought-provoking quality.

"Not About Iraq" has its moments of impressive dancing (for example, a brilliant trio of kung-fu kicks, leaps, and heavy breathing by Maria Gillespie, Noellie Bordelet, and Phithsamay Linthahane). The impact of the piece, however, comes not from the dancing, but from the dexterous interlacing of the work's diverse elements. Some might view the abundant use of text and fourth-grade gestures (bent arms titling to make the scales of justice; fingers as a toy gun and its trigger; see-no-evil, speak-no-evil-style covered eyes and mouths; a shrug – "This is 'I don't know'") as uninventive, better-suited to theater than dance. But the spoken words and familiar gestures, when interspersed with dance, help to make "Not About Iraq" more accessible to a broader audience.

"This is a joke," says Paggett toward the end of "Not About Iraq," wishing the war were really a joke, perhaps. "This is a prayer," she says. "You know what this is," Paggett tells us. "This is not the end of the dance," she states, as she walks backward and the lights suddenly cut out. "Not About Iraq" is many things, but one thing it is not is unmoving.