

[Dance](#) November 25, 2016

Architecture Made Tactile: Gabrielle Lamb's Pigeonwing Dance at Baruch PAC



Pigeonwing Dance in Gabrielle Lamb's *Bewilderness*.

New York, N.Y. On November 20, Baruch Performing Arts Center presented a pair of works by Gabrielle Lamb, a 2014 Princess Grace Award recipient, at Baruch's Mason Hall. The first, *Tessellations*, premiered at New York Live Arts earlier this year and was danced by The Joffrey Ensemble. Pigeonwing Dance, Lamb's company, performed the world premiere of *Bewilderness*, a semi-abstract response to Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Although thematically disparate, Lamb's choreography illustrates a fluidly architectural sensibility and an engaging tactility.

The term tessellation refers to a tiling or packing of shapes in such a way that there are no gaps or overlap—think M.C. Escher, though Lamb creates an equally compelling visual definition in her *Tessellations*. The nine members of The Joffrey Ensemble push and pull each other through various mathematical configurations, a soloist who begins the work outside of the tightly-clustered group variously resisting, conforming to, and interrupting the impressively inventive structures they create. This soloist's movement is rapid-fire and frenetic as compared to her smooth counterparts, at one point spinning through floorwork at a shockingly quick pace.

A particularly effective sequence sees the dancers begin in three rows of three, closely packed together but with each row occupying different levels. They go through a gesturally informed sequence, framing heads and hands, detail-perfect and visually arresting in their precision. The choreographic canon and contrapuntal use of space put me in mind of a fugue—an aural tessellation of sorts. There are, of course, duets and smaller groupings throughout, the duets largely categorized by a playful approach to patterning and partnering. The last of these emerges from an ever-shifting line that finally settles, only to be broken by our earlier plucky soloist, all departing to leave a final man and woman together onstage—wild attitude turns, partnered spins out of gooey grand plies, lovely moments in which the action is driven by one's fingertips touching the other's palm. In the end, others enter and adjust the man's position until both find their way to standing, smiling as they walk together to complete the pattern of the group that has re-emerged to cluster, facing upstage right.



Patrick O'Brien in Gabrielle Lamb's *Bewilderness*.

In the prologue to *Bewilderness*, Emilie Durville enters downstage of the curtain. She crosses the stage to a bulky spotlight; when she flicks it on, the music—a jazz rendition of a Purcell aria—begins. She plays with the curtain, helping the spotlight illuminate its texture and deepen its shadows, using it to hide from the light or bask in it—a theme that continues as she crawls under the curtain and causes it to open to the stage. She shifts the spotlight periodically to illuminate the spaces she occupies, drawing our eyes repeatedly to the details of her hands—plucking at her shirt, covering her eyes, sketching her surroundings—even as she sinks through luscious plies and lunges, pretzels her legs, bends back to rest the top of her head on the floor. When disembodied hands appear beneath the upstage traveler, both comical and frightening, her wary manner seems justified. Her final act is to rearrange the hands to hold onto each other; the song ends, she switches off the spotlight and walks it slowly offstage, leaving the clasped hands squirming behind her.



Pigeonwing Dance in Gabrielle Lamb's *Bewilderness*.

One thing is already clear: In this work, always follow the hands. When Giovanna Gamna enters the space, marking the beginning of the piece proper, her first action is to untangle the hands upstage (later, they'll be joined by the head of Patrick O'Brien, coolly observing the goings-on). In the solo that follows, her clasped hands frame long legs that sweep through floorwork. The pile of hands vanishes when two dancers—O'Brien and Robin Cantrell—run up the aisles to join Gamna onstage. Gamna is magnetic, connecting the other dancers as they trickle in, twisting them into complex structures. Any movement from one sets off chain reactions in every other, as though they are telling ghost stories.

As the piece develops and duets emerge—a dancer supports herself on one leg as her partner levers her smoothly backward to the floor, fingertips fly, every dancer twists themselves into knots to fit into each other's spaces—it becomes apparent that we are watching conversations between members of a community whose method of communication just happens to be an exceptionally specific movement vocabulary. Themes and relationships surface and fade away. What saves the work from becoming alien and unrelatable is the tactility of it: The hands lead the movement, and there is a sort of visual empathy that comes with watching the dancers touch each other and their world.



Giorgia Bovo in Gabrielle Lamb's *Bewilderness*.

In a women's section, Jane Cracovaner stands back and watches an assembly line–like sequence, both fascinated and frightened by something that seems both familiar and distant. When she begins a solo and the rest of the cast watches, her pulsing movement seems to mark her as an outsider; they stare when she stops with a hand on her forehead. A duet between Cracovaner and Forrest Hersey sees them checking in with each other constantly. Their heads fit in each other's hands; the music begs, "Remember me" as they swipe through a series of attitudes. They smooth their heads away from their hearts, cradle their skulls to drip their gaze downward. Fingertips alight at temples and the world becomes dreamlike.

In another, Giorgia Bova holds focus through a series of duets with changing partners and beautiful sections with the full ensemble. Ultimately she finds her way to the center of the group, controlling them as though delicately manipulating a force field surrounding her—an outstretched hand knocks them over, while retracting it makes them slither back. They lift her like she is their queen, and she moves them like they are an extension of herself.



Patrick O'Brien and Giovanna Gamna in Gabrielle Lamb's *Bewilderness*.

The final movement, a duet between Gamna and O'Brien set to a different jazz cover of the Purcell aria heard in the prologue, has a captivating darkness that is largely the result of the intensity of these dancers' focus. Gamna holds O'Brien's foot and finds a way to wrap herself in it. Lying on her side, her hands trace patterns in the air, but her gaze rarely leaves O'Brien. Their partnering is sinuous—he twists her, at one point, up into a shoulder stand supported on one side—as though they cannot help but slither into new shapes to try to fit the other into. They dance in unison when the others re-enter, until they are moved to create one last architectural structure.

Much like Solnit's writings, *Bewilderness* suggests rather than states. Lamb's movement invention is captivating and engagingly tactile; her use of space and the architecture she crafts deserve more in-depth analysis than is allowed by a single viewing. My one complaint was an occasional forced feeling from certain of the company members—if dance is how these beings react to the world, those reactions must be fully embodied at all times, not done by rote as though they are merely the next step in the choreography without meaning. This, however, was only so noticeable in a handful of instances because for the most part, their performance is utterly convincing.

All images by Charles Roussel, Courtesy Lamb.



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