

# The Oregonian

Dance review

## Rachel Tess packs a lot into 'Always, Always/Never, Never'

Friday August, 2010

Catherine Thomas, Special to the Oregonian

Rachel Tess, the Juilliard-trained director of the Portland/Sweden-based Rumpus Room Dance, is outfitting herself for a packed dance card this season.

Tess' company was recently named one of Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch in 2010," she's collaborating with Oregon Ballet Theatre and BodyVox on an upcoming OBT world premiere set to Stravinsky, and for the better part of August, she's been deep in development for the December premiere of "Once a Fool...," an evening-length performance Tess is billing as a "one-woman traveling show" heavily influenced by shifting venues and viewers.

"Always, Always/Never, Never," a short 40-minute work appearing for a two-night run at Conduit this Thursday and Friday, is a prelude to her solo premiere. Curiously, it's a duet, with no hint to the site-specific, audience-interactive aspects of the unfinished work. But the work underscores the rich inventiveness and kinetic precision that made last year's "RESA" a must-see, and the chemistry between Tess and fellow Juilliard alum Isaac Spencer elevates the dance to much more than a snapshot of the final product.

Even when occupying opposite corners of the stage, Tess and Spencer seem in constant calibration. To the screaming blues-rock anthem that opens the dance, Spencer, torso immobile, swings one leg wildly in big arcs of accumulated momentum, counterpoint to Tess' stuttering, hard-motion lunges until he loses his balance to the stage floor, still wildly scissoring his legs. That scene gives

way to the dance's most serene moments, set to Shostakovich, the pair mirroring each other in a waltzlike sway, all legs in languid sweeps crisscrossing the stage.

Tess excels at choreographing pinpoint gesture to read as mood: quiet, almost hesitant footwork with one arm crooked behind her back; an ornate dance of fingers weaving in and out from stiffly-held wrists; the aggressive sweep of her hand against her dress. And her experiments with isolation can be riveting, as in the erratic quake of Spencer's lower limbs against his puppetlike arms.

There's a tendency to overkill – Spencer's later squirming, the writhe and rub of a body infested with invisible pests, comes as no surprise, and the exuberant flail of the finale looks as if it could have been transplanted from any jam-band mosh pit. Tess' strength in this piece lies in her ability to take one contained movement – an up-down pulse of knees, a tight hip sway – and elongate and accelerate it until it boils.

Continues 8 p.m. Friday, Aug. 27, **Conduit Dance**, 918 S.W. Yamhill St., Suite 401; \$15 at the door.

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