

Imbuing Convention With the Uncommon

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MONTCLAIR, N.J. — An electronic hum builds to a crash of sound at the start of Susan Marshall's new "Adamantine." Then silence, and a figure moves on a darkened stage, a shadow thrown against the back wall. It takes a moment or two to realize that the shadow doesn't belong to the dancer; its movements are similar in style but not a reflection of hers.

This counterintuitive moment is an emblem of Ms. Marshall's fascinating new piece, which opened on Thursday, presented by Montclair State University's Peak Performances series at the Alexander Kasser Theater.

Nothing happens the way you think it might. The humming, grinding electronic score is punctuated by Bob Dylan-like ballads of ordinary life. (The music is by Peter Whitehead, who occasionally climbs up onto the stage to sing.) Banks of lights descend and disappear again. A dancer, seated sideways to us, repeatedly switches on an overhead light, then is suddenly seen writhing as strobe lights flicker. A huge curtain cuts the stage in half. A lantern swings, pendulum-like and alarming, across the stage and into the dancers' paths. Later, a sandbag does the same.

Nothing about this feels gimmicky or contrived. The work has a lived-in, pared-down quality unusual to new pieces in the United States, and that's doubtless because Ms. Marshall and her company have been in residence at Montclair, able to experiment on the stage for much longer than is habitual. (Most new works get a day onstage to fix lighting and staging issues, never mind any choreographic problems.)

Ms. Marshall has consistently made pieces that look very different from one another, and the movement that was essentially pedestrian (walking, running, gesturing, falling) at the outset of her almost three-decade career is now more complex, although characterized by the same rough-edged elegance.

In "Adamantine," the look of the movement is often reminiscent of William Forsythe's more recent work; dancers curve their arms upward, articulating their shoulders out of line, hips angling, legs buckling under them. Three men, standing close to one another, move with quick, near-invisible transitions, sometimes slapping their own bodies or those of others to generate a sudden shooting leg or an abruptly torqued upper body.

But although Ms. Marshall, like many others, may have been influenced by Mr. Forsythe's work and aesthetic, she is a powerful enough artist to transmute this material into something of her own. Her six dancers, in street-wise grunge-chic gray sportswear by Olivera Gajic, own their movement, and their various encounters and actions have a quality of immediacy and reality that quietly removes an ever-present question in contemporary dance: What does it mean?

In "Adamantine" the meaning is the slippery movement. It's the beauty of Ms. Marshall's rigorous juxtapositions of the quotidian and the fantastical. It's Mark Stanley's shadow-casting lights and the dancers crawling under a revolving curtain or dodging a swinging sandbag. It's their world, and for a short while, it's ours, too.



Kristen Hollinsworth and Joseph Poulson rehearsing Susan Marshall's "Adamantine" at Montclair State University. Juan Arredondo for The New York Times