

## Susan Marshall and Sally Silvers Entrance the Eye

By [Deborah Jowitt](#)

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Adamantine, the title of Susan Marshall's thrilling new work, means hard, impenetrable, and brilliant in the way that a diamond is brilliant. The behavior of the six dancers reflects those qualities only subtly, but the surrounding environment does so in astonishing ways. No wonder the performers often look as if the ground were slipping from under their feet and their twisting joints and swinging limbs were encountering impermeable air. Melding with another is almost impossible.

Peak Performances, the series run by Montclair State University's Office of Arts and Cultural Programming (executive director Jedediah Wheeler) is one of the few enterprises that grants choreographers residencies in which to develop projects. Marshall couldn't have created a production like *Adamantine* entirely in a studio and put it together in the theater during a tech rehearsal the day before the premiere. The pipes that hold the overhead lighting equipment lower and rise, curtains of various sorts and sizes descend, a platform on wheels sends upward both a beam of light and a rush of air. A rope ending in a sandbag (one of the usual backstage weights) suddenly drops center stage to become a pendulum. These resources and Mark Stanley's stunning lighting design make the stage a place of extremes, an irrational interplay of brightness and darkness.

Take the beginning. In a corner, Petra Van Noort is defining her small illuminated area with fluid tempests of movement. We hear warning sounds and what might be the murmur of a crowd in Peter Whitehead's partly electronic score. Behind her and a little to the side, a shadow dances in an oval of light projected on the backdrop. Gradually you realize that it's not her shadow, although it's very like her. Then a pipe bearing a spotlight descends so low that the lamp is only an arm's length above the huddle of dancers that lie beneath it center stage. They can make the instrument tip and swing; they can point it at Van Noort and then at Ildikó Tóth, who replaces her.

Whenever Tóth, a gleaming figure in her short silver dress and kneepads (costumes by Olivera Gajic), slips and falls, the stage goes dark for a second or two. The recumbent people can block the light with their hands.

Once, when all the dancers are rushing about, a single moving ray catches and loses them. But although this place they inhabit is clearly violent, a world in upheaval, they don't attack one another. In one brief spot-lit trio, Luke Miller, Joseph Poulson, and Darrin M. Wright stay close together, turning as they whip their legs and arms through the narrow spaces that separate them; every now and then one man lightly slaps another's flank or shoulder—more a signal than a punishment. Toward the end of the hour-long piece, the three reassemble. Is it my imagination that they've softened a little?

Still, embraces are difficult. When Miller and Wright want to hug each other tightly, the others keep breaking between them—not purposefully, just on the go. In contrast to this moment, yet underlining it, is one of the several gentle, rueful songs that composer Whitehead materializes from the pit to deliver while strumming on his guitar. "I just want you to be here with me," he says. He's still singing when Van Noort and Tóth slam together and a white dust arises from the impact, and when Kristen Hollinsworth leans carefully, almost seductively over the fan-spotlight and raises her arms so that the flimsy, clear-plastic jacket she's donned can float off her into the air. In another scene, Hollinsworth is joined by Miller under a low-hanging lamp that she can switch on and off. Every time it's off, a strobe light kicks in, and the pair's awkward, questioning poses move into wrangling intimacy. Gradually, the two behaviors merge, no matter what the light. In a later episode, Tóth makes her way along a suspended silver sheet, leaning into it. As the hanging slowly revolves, you see that her colleagues are following her from the other side, holding her weight—bracing but not embracing.

The superb performers are listed as choreographic collaborators, but Marshall's imagination impels the images. As always, a certain down-to-earth quality anchors her mind's strange, poetic flights. You don't question the enigmas she poses, or wonder why the sudden descent of a stage-wide white curtain at the rear seems momentous, or why, just once, Everett Elton Bradman joins Whitehead on a raised platform and attacks a closely miked drum while Whitehead rapidly strums a small guitar.

In the end, the performers are running and dancing while the sandbag swings. Without slackening speed, anyone who's near its arc grabs it, runs with it, and gives it a push. They look unworried, going their individual ways, yet this is a very dangerous game in which team spirit is implicit and if you want to live, you have to play. That's when the lights go out and all sound ceases.



Rosalie O'Connor  
Joseph Poulson in Susan Marshall's "Adamantine"