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### What Is Man?

Investigating gender stereotypes with precision instruments  
by **Deborah Jowitt**  
December 12th, 2006 7:01 PM

This is the season during which, across the U.S, people gather to applaud a ballet that clothes a possibly Freudian dream affair between a prepubescent girl and a kitchen implement in tulle and marzipan. It is, therefore, a holiday treat of sorts to see a piece in which serious issues are softened only by smart choreographic abstracting and re-molding.

For years now, Risa Jaroslow has created works in which dancers mingle with non-dancers to express ideas about art and the human condition. In her *Resist/Surrender*, she deploys four dancers, plus 11 men of varying ages—not all of whom have dance training—to explore ideas about what constitutes masculine behavior in our culture, and how those ideas shape our society. A tall order.

Jaroslow, known for the tenderness and earthy strength of her movement style, doesn't focus on specific individual narratives. That is, John Regan doesn't talk about maleness among firemen or John O'Leary about his experiences as a lawyer. Instead, she creates choreographic tasks and games that—cleverly and meaningfully—delve into competition, aggressiveness, prescribed behavior, and bonding. The 11 additional men function as a kind of non-judgmental Greek chorus that sits informally in full view when not engaging with the dancers (which I wish they did more often).

The space is dominated by Perry Gunther's six-paneled wall of horizontally placed boards. It's against this background that barechested Luke Gutsell first struggles, pumping along on his belly in a pool of rosy light provided by Carol Mullins. He could be working out, he could be a soldier on a battlefield, but he plays no roles. What we're seeing is the essence of arduous action. Later, in pairs, the terrific performers (Gutsell, Gabriel Forestieri, Elise Knudson, and Paul Singh) wrestle until they're gasping for breath, trying to pin each other to the wooden barricade.

Scott Johnson's fine score—conducted by Eric Poland and played from the church balcony by Fireworks Ensemble ( Brian Coughlin, Bass; Oren Fader, Guitar; James Johnston, piano; Leight Stuart, cello)—also involves the voices of men playing a card game. The dancers, too, play games. First though, they demonstrate meet-and-greet behavior that's the polite equivalent of dogs sniffing each other's asses. Knudson's presence is provocative; Jaroslow didn't choose her to exhibit contrasting "femaleness" but rather to make the point that women may adopt what's deemed to be male behavior



*Resist/Surrender*: Curiously provocative  
photo: Anja Hitzenberger

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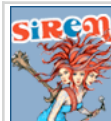
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out of choice or necessity. All four show how buff and tough they are by bursts of athletic dancing. They size each other up warily. They gesture greetings and attempt to shake hands as if this were an entirely new and dangerous experience (Knudson gets accidentally squashed between two of the guys when they ineptly reach out to each other).

As a follow-up to this, the 11 additional performers, wearing overcoats and hats, high-five one another, shake hands, and indulge in a little push-and-pull. They also carry the sartorial norm to exhilarating excess, donning ties and helping one another to do the same (an important point), until every neck looks like a display rack. For the performers, however, dress code becomes a matter for anger and rebellion. Lined up, one behind another, the dancers remove the leather belts they've strapped over their indigo pants and tops (by Clint Ramos) and dangle them out to one side. The first person in line throws his belt down and goes to the end of the line, during which time the belts are passed along and the process is repeated. Each person gets rid of his/her belt with different sorts of disgust, rage, and fatigue. The act goes beyond querying the wearing of a belt to suggest how notions of conformity affect or should affect us.

The most engaging competition is one in which the dancers treat the elements of a very concise, attractive phrase of dancing as if each move were a ball to be caught. As they sprint around the room, jockeying for position close to the one who "has" the phrase, a person will cry "got it!" pick up, say, a curving arm gesture and take off in the phrase as the next guy carrying the "ball" (we spectators get very wrapped up in this). In a brief reprise later in the piece, the players get more argumentative, confronting, blocking, taunting ("Do you want it?").

There are some curiously provocative moments. In shadowy night light, the four gang up on one another. Forestieri whispers to Gutsell, while Knudson takes Singh's hand. A butting of chest against chest almost becomes a kiss. The 11 men, who've already brought water and towels so the performers can mop up after their bouts, stop the violence when the four leave their second, vituperative movement-passing game to start banging themselves against the wall. The 11 guys pry them off the barrier, set them up in a line, and rip open their shirts. Then, grouped in twos and threes, these caregiver men carefully, but with firmness, run their hands down the contenders' bare chests. They look almost as if they were in an operating room—as if stereotypical masculinity were something that could be probed for, maybe excised. In the end, the 11 form a quiet, living wall—bracing themselves while slowly, wearily, Forestieri, Gutsell, Knudson, and Singh press against them, lean on them, climb them. It's a tremendously powerful moment. Whatever you think it means in terms of a message, the image burns itself into your brain, into your gut.

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