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Surreal seascape

Randy James creates darting denizens of the deep for 'Flying Lobsters'

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DANCE

NEW YORK -- Historic St. Marks' Church-in-the-Bowery makes a perfect sanctuary for modern dance. Its plainly furnished interior, home to the Danspace Project, has a polished, wooden floor and rises to lofty height above a columned frame, suggesting both high-mindedness and lack of pretension.

Best of all are the sight-lines, which place viewers on the same level as the dancers or just above them, offering an intimate experience at the edge of a broad, clean space. The choreography that Randy James presented here, on Friday, benefited greatly from this setting.

James, whose Randy James Dance Works is based in Highland Park, showed a darkly comic new dance called "Flying Lobsters" on a program that also included his recent "2 out of 200" and the older "Unknown Horizon" and "Reconstruction." All these pieces employ unconventional, spatial perspectives.

While the high-energy dancing in "Unknown Horizon" explodes, at times, from the center of the space; the characters in "Reconstruction" often turn to face in different directions, making them appear disoriented and fragmenting their relationships. In "2 out of 200," set to a portentous score by Mark Zuckerman, the dancers thrash their way through a sea of shiny black balloons like caviar, swimming and submerging themselves in this wonderfully elastic medium. In "Lobsters," the distance between groups or events adds to the work's drama. None of these effects comes across as clearly when seen from below, in other words, when the viewer is sitting in the orchestra of a traditional, proscenium theater.

In the first half of the program, James' work appeared relatively unadorned, making its points with bodies in motion. The second half employed props (like the balloons) to create dreamlike environments.

Insouciance and self-confidence characterize the opening "Unknown Horizon," a piece filled with athletic bravado and slinky gestures that spell out a semaphore of cool, all set to jazz by Tigger Benford. When not dashing off in all directions, the dancers stop to pose in lines. Yet the action never freezes, nor loses its sense of breath and impulse.

"Reconstruction" offers a portrait of psycho-spiritual anguish. To the sound of choirs singing, two women and two men scuffle and twitch, then flop to the ground with helpless exhaustion. The women attempt, fruitlessly, to engage the men, who back into each other and hold hands in secret. With this connection, the action grows tender and supportive for the first time, and, as the women appear to sleep, the men's duet becomes a tumble, not a struggle.

The outrageous scenario for "Flying Lobsters," which includes a kiddie pool and jellyfish characters, who wear bell-shaped skirts over their heads like lampshades, initially prompts a chuckle. With Lawrence Edwards voguing in a gold-lamé dress and an elbow-length glove, the piece is half cocktail party and half scuba-diving special à la the Discovery Channel. Yet James brings the instincts of a shark to this underwater setting.

As the Surreal work progresses, with dancers darting frantically and stealing one another's protective coverings, the choreographer suggests how much dishing over Cosmopolitans may resemble the life-and-death struggle of flamboyantly costumed shell-fish. Paranoia -- especially the fear of being devoured -- reigns among these denizens of the deep, as they go about their business, conspiring, copulating weirdly and rising suddenly in a mass to engulf their prey.

Whimsical, yes, but "Sponge Bob Square Pants" this is not.

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