

Dancing with Eva Yaa Asantewaa: Exclusive Reviews

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Copyediting by Deborah Feller

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"Beacon"

Yanira Castro + Company

Dance Theater Workshop at Brooklyn Lyceum

Park Slope, Brooklyn

January 14, 2005

"Earth brings forth many horrors, terrors and agonies," writes Aeschylus in *The Libation Bearers* before shifting away from the unpredictability of wild nature and back to the all-too-predictable horror humans visit upon one another. The play unfolds within Agamemnon's tomb, a place redolent with a murky aura years after Clytemnestra, his wife, and Aegisthus, her lover, murdered him. The furious Orestes slashes locks from his curly hair, laying them on the ground as sacrifice and sign of his intent to avenge his father.

In *Beacon*--a new dance installation set in the cold, raw, exposed brick of a former Brooklyn bathhouse--Yanira Castro and her company of four women dancers reactivate the intensity of Aeschylus' alarming visions. Hatred, greed, lust for power, deceit, betrayal, slaughter, and widespread suffering unleashed by the work of man remain an integral part of our human story. Although ingeniously non-literal, *Beacon* has at least the potential to bring incidents of misdeed to mind and to make you feel uncertain in any given moment who you are meant to be. Are you the wrongdoer? The wronged? The avenger? The dumbstruck, helpless, guilt-ridden, or numbed witness to injustice? That's what I suspect Castro had in mind, although I suspect that for her hip, downtown dance audience, her efforts achieved no more than spine-tingling spectacle.

The desolate Lyceum space inspired Castro and installation collaborator Roderick Murray to envision an environment that would disturb audiences. Your program, tied with either a ribbon of a specific color, determines into which draped, Plexiglas-enclosed pen you will be herded. It's not so much claustrophobic as it is a violation of your hardwon personal space and autonomy. At each of these viewing boxes, ushers direct you to sit on one of a few backless, wooden benches that cram in only four across with no elbow room or place to rest the winter coat you may or may not want to shed. If you've arrived with a friend or two, you will be separated: Castro prefers that you face this work without any familiar supports or comforts.

One couple--wise to the game--asked if I would switch my white-ribboned program with the woman's grey-ribboned one so that they could sit together. I refused. A little later, I saw that the pair had managed to work the trick with someone else. (Very slick. Could Castro have anticipated this end-run?) I shrugged, sidled into the top row, and soon found myself smack up against the blood-red drape that temporarily concealed the Plexiglas wall to my right. Three benchmates quickly filed in behind me, and I was trapped. Fighting off both a fresh cold and hot

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flashes--not a good mix in any environment--I consoled myself with the knowledge that my ordeal would be over in no more than 45 minutes.

Were we prisoners? Or--as red drapes flew up and the gaping performance space and Castro's dancers were revealed--were we TV viewers peering at images carefully selected to restrict the potential range of our vision, our feelings, and our responses?

The performance space, flanked by staircases to an encircling walkway above, was at first dimly lit. (Several fluorescent bulbs and other subtler sources of lighting, designed by Murray and varied throughout the dance, gave this rough, earthy space a suitable, unrelieved creepiness.) Dancer Pamela Vail, tear-wrecked eye makeup dried above her cheeks, stood close to the left wall, dressed in panties and a wispy white wrap that vaguely suggested a loosening cocoon or translucent shroud. The severe, abstract movements of her joints, though silent, could have emitted a crinkling sound. Some poses--cool as marble, lovely, and fleeting--recalled depictions of flight in ancient classic sculpture. At some point, though, she collapsed face-down and remained motionless for a long stretch.

Black-clad Nancy Ellis, Heather Olson, and Marya Wethers skittered out of the dark on all fours, backs arching and jerking to the scratches, burps, and whirs in Dan Siegler's score, thrashing like beached seals. They advanced, mouths agape, and one wondered, What creatures are these? Greek chorus? Trio of Furies? Sometimes they resembled beetles gyrating and trembling, tumbling over onto their sides, endlessly righting themselves only to fall over again. At one point, towards the end of the work, they coursed around the space's rim like terrifying ravens, "wings" and mouths opened wide. You will find their like amid the spookier precincts of Symbolist art.

From somewhere came a woman's desperate whispers: "I can't stand it here," and "I have to leave!" (Wait! Did Siegler figure out a way to make a viewer's panic attack?) Another moment was pierced by a distant scream. (Clytemnestra?) Vail later rejoined the scene, all her movements taut, stretched to their limits, monstrous, heroic, iconic. She held her fingertips rigidly closed upon her palms, and I thought back to the radiant sphinx-like duo in Castro's dance suite, *Cartography: haru, verano, autumn, hiver*. As she folded her limbs slowly and neatly and crawled backwards, this slightly-built dancer appeared similarly monumental.

One of the women-in-black removed another's curly wig and placed it on the floor. Its former wearer bent forward, pressing her face into the ground as the other Wyrd sisters quietly backed away. This moment seemed less like an echo of Orestes' gesture of grief and resolve to avenge murder with murder as--perhaps--a sign that this Fury had opted to finally step out of the nightmare.

Performances of *Beacon* run through January 23. See www.dtw.org or call 212-924-0077.

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Eva Yaa Asantewaa has written on dance since 1974 and worked as a freelance dance journalist since 1976, published in *Dance Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, *Soho News*, and other publications.

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