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On the Fly: Five Easy Pieces, Among the Douglasses and Lockheeds

By ROSLYN SULCAS OCT. 6, 2008

The award for best dance location of the year (the decade? ever?) decidedly goes to the latest edition of “Breaking Ground: A Dance Charrette,” an annual initiative that gives five choreographers the task of creating a five-minute work at a site revealed only five days before performances.

Last week the choreographers — Jonah Bokaer, Tania Isaac, Stephan Koplowitz, Gus Solomons Jr. and Nami Yamamoto — learned that their site was Hangar B at Floyd Bennett Field, New York’s first municipal airport, on the very edge of Brooklyn, looking over Jamaica Bay.

It was an inspired choice by Joanna Haigood, the director of “Breaking Ground,” and Aviva Davidson, the director of Dancing in the Streets, the organization that produces Breaking Ground. (The performances were also part of the openhousenewyork weekend.) The enormous, light-filled hangar is home to the Historic Aircraft Restoration Project, and the space is magical, resonant with history and the inevitable questions about war, death, politics and patriotism that the aircraft silently pose.

Perhaps a response to those questions was too much to expect of five-minute pieces, seen successively as groups were led from one performance area to another. On Sunday Mr. Bokaer’s “Autograph” showed two women tracing their fingertips along the contours of a Douglas C-47 aircraft, as an echolocator whirred in the

background. Ms. Yamamoto's "My tail doesn't curl" set three dancers running wildly beneath a Lockheed plane, with a fourth limping on crutches.

In Ms. Isaac's "it occurs to me to wonder who remembers," she and Shaneeka Harrell uttered mysterious phrases while dancing, then entered the open body of a Sikorsky Pelican. In Mr. Solomons's "Well ... Grounded," the wonderfully deadpan Valda Setterfield was wheeled about on a fire-extinguishing kit, before she, Mr. Solomons and Michael Blake poured martinis and charmingly toasted the audience.

Most interesting was Mr. Koplowitz's strangely sad "Five Entrances Into a War Machine," using the same kind of plane (a Douglas A-4 Skyhawk) in which John McCain was shot down over Vietnam. Nine dancers dressed in white mechanics' overalls clung to, and jumped up against, the underside of the aircraft, falling heavily to the floor, spinning out of a nearby door, or carrying one another's limp bodies over their shoulders.

Mr. Koplowitz's work looked equally compelling when viewed from behind, from Ms. Isaac's performance space, and the way these five pieces impinged on one another, visually and aurally, was perhaps the most interesting choreographic aspect of this "Breaking Ground." Better dances would have been nice, but the space was theater in itself.

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