

The curatorial eye

Daniel McCusker's 'tHisTHat'

BY DEBRA CASH

⊗ Boston's dance showcases have often been motley affairs — mature work rubbing shoulders with not-ready-for-prime-time explorations, dances made to the stopwatch and according to a deadline. Bring in a curator as seasoned as Daniel McCusker, however, and motley changes to melody. McCusker had been wondering how to shine a light on his own creative preoccupations as a dancemaker, concerns that include non-narrative dances that “require a mentally and emotionally active audience to imaginatively complete them. These are pieces that use form and structure to convey content.” (Think Paul Klee rather than Pablo Picasso.) So last weekend he gathered some friends and associates and came up with a coherently beautiful “salon” of dance and video works he called “tHisTHat Show No. 1” at Green Street Studios in Cambridge. May there be No. 2, and No. 3, and up into double digits.

I first noticed Ana Isabel Keilson more than a decade ago in McCusker's work. She was 14. I wrote then that “she looks like Pippi Longstocking and dances like a diva.” The Barnard grad is now a free-lance dancer in New York and, lucky girl, working as the film and video archivist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Her own video “Monitor 2” is a standard newbie juxtaposition of split-screen details: smooth clavicle and inner elbow, the surface of a jersey T-shirt and damp curls, shot not quite close enough to dissolve into abstract shapes and textures.

The details of Keilson's solo *Tidal/Perch*, however, read like *Firebird* played *au naturel*. To the sounds of surf and a meditative accordion she evoked a naiad or a seabird. She danced with the carefree autonomy of a wild creature, balancing on deeply arched feet, bobbling from a spring deep inside her torso, and finally rolling across the floor holding her feet in her hands in a series of hyper-charged oscillating triangles. Keilson's still a diva all right, grown into a smashing performer.

Hints of narrative felt their way into the snippet of Caitlin Corbett's work-in-progress *Tom's Wealth*, which so far takes off on Tom Sawyer primarily through Chris Eastburn's delicious twisting of such

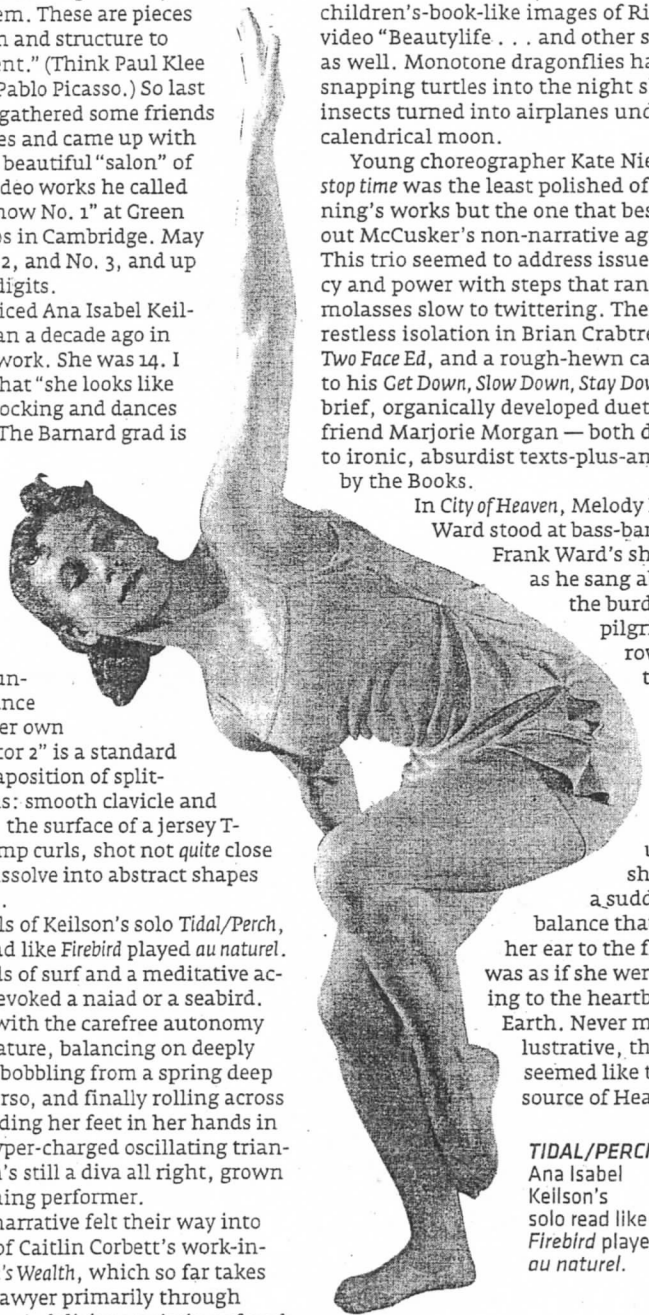
Americana favorites as “Oh! Susannah” A crowd of 30 dancers — her trained company supplemented by folk ranging from young teens to seniors — gestured in simple choric ensembles. When they lay down and rose, it was like watching the cresting of a series of waves. Erin Koh's dance slurped along the floor; the lyrical duet of Marjorie Morgan and Leah Bergmann sent the women traveling over and under each other's paths like a churning riverboat paddlewheel.

There was a bayou sensibility in the children's-book-like images of Rick Fox's video “Beautylife . . . and other stories” as well. Monotone dragonflies hauled snapping turtles into the night sky, and insects turned into airplanes under the calendrical moon.

Young choreographer Kate Nies's *how to stop time* was the least polished of the evening's works but the one that best carried out McCusker's non-narrative agenda. This trio seemed to address issues of agency and power with steps that ranged from molasses slow to twittering. There was a restless isolation in Brian Crabtree's trio *Two Face Ed*, and a rough-hewn casualness to his *Get Down, Slow Down, Stay Down*, his brief, organically developed duet with old friend Marjorie Morgan — both dances set to ironic, absurdist texts-plus-ambiance by the Books.

In *City of Heaven*, Melody Ruffin Ward stood at bass-baritone Frank Ward's shoulder as he sang about the burdens of a pilgrim of sorrow. Persistently, her back to the audience, she reached out and up. When she fell into a sudden lateral balance that brought her ear to the floor, it was as if she were listening to the heartbeat of the Earth. Never merely illustrative, their unity seemed like the very source of Heaven. ⊗

TIDAL/PERCH
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