



Ilona Bito and Rowan Magee in The A.O. Movement Collective's "90 ways to Wake from drowning," premiering July 30 and 31 at Joyce SoHo. (CRISTINA RAMIREZ HIRST)

Love Among The Ruins

Car crashes and heavy slow dances with the AOMC

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In "90 ways to Wake from drowning," a new work that will have its debut at Joyce SoHo on July 30 and 31, choreographer Sarah A.O. Rosner and her A.O. Movement Collective communicate a profound hopelessness but also a tenderness — and queerness — that embodies the new American generation.

Sad, funny, and fairly disturbing, it's also skillfully crafted and charmingly performed by a multi-talented cast of seven — Lillie DeArmon, Jon Cooper, Cristina Jasen, Cory Antiel, Rowan Magee, Ilona Bito, and Larissa Sheldon.

The score is a mix of recordings including songs by Rachel's, Amon Tobin, and The Great Republic of Rough and Ready, with ambient music composed by Chris Spears and Sam Stein and some added pop.

During the hour-long quasi-narrative piece, the action spirals back around certain curves, conveying (again and again) a search for lost or misplaced meanings. In the aftermath of some tragic event, over which they had no control, these survivors try to live their lives, but this same event keeps pulling them back, holding them in stasis — “purgatory,” Rosner called the section in rehearsal.

“I need to see it again,” Bito repeats several times throughout the work, frozen in her tracks amidst a landscape of television sets and other 20th century artifacts. Huddled around an invisible wound in the world, the group stops to relive the awful moment when it happened. Each time, Bito receives the same disjointed response: “It. Doesn’t. Exist. Anymore.” Even the images on the TV offer no respite.

The group is ever-present, standing, watching, stamping heavily together, or falling down listlessly and staring off into the emptiness. Several repeating duets showcase strong lifts, intimate couplings, mundane details, a violent yet precise competitive choreography of plastic bag tossing and catching that ends in a harmonious rejection of the thing — and plenty of gender mixing.

These earnest dances are the heart of the work, and underscore its disappointed hopefulness. Solos express more self-destructiveness — loss of control, anger, the irony of invincibility. Jasen’s rendition of “Piece of My Heart” takes the song to a darkly literal heart-breaking extreme.

“I know that love and angst are out of fashion,” the 26-year-old choreographer told Gay City News. “Who doesn’t want to be the cool kid? But I’d much rather make things that fail interestingly.”

Rosner, who graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 2006 and came to New York City in 2008, has hit the ground running with big plans and big action, determined to change the whole business of dance. Founder as well of a freelancing collective called A.O. PRO(+ductions) and a community hub and blog, Urgent Artist, Rosner wants to see “sustainable dance-making in our lifetime, where there are resources, time, support, and interest.”

“We have to evolve dance and its whole economy,” she proclaimed. “It’s not working.”

The A.O.M.C., made up of mostly Sarah Lawrence alumni, has been developing “90 ways” since 2008 with the support of a Van Lier Fellowship from Dance Theater Workshop and the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center’s LPAC Lab program.

Lofty ideals — including what Rosner calls “anti-ephemeral pomo humanism” — and informed determination will continue to guide the principles and actions of Rosner and her A.O. triad. She has already taken her place standing with the revolutionaries of dance. But at the end of the day, it’s about the work. When asked how she feels about finishing the piece and making her New York City debut, she couldn’t help but admit, “It’s terrifying to be done with it.”

And that is the ephemeral truth of any artist’s work.