

Alicia Grant and Emily Law, *Emerging Voices: New Works*, Toronto Dance Theatre, Toronto

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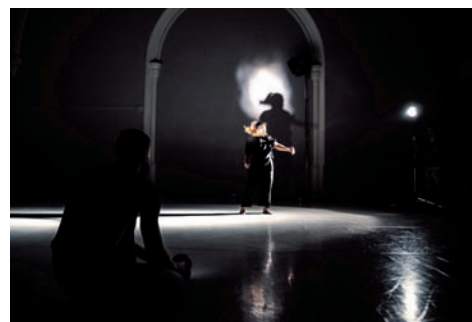
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Emily Law

↖ *Mercury dust*, dancers: Jarrett Siddall, Peter Kelly and Danah Rosales, 2017.

Photos : Francesca Chudnoff

Alicia Grant

→ *TDT HOUSE OF DREAMS*, dancers: Yuichiro Inoue, Megumi Kokuba, Justin de Luna, Pulga Muchochoma, and Christianne Ullmark, 2017.

Photo : Francesca Chudnoff

Alicia Grant and Emily Law

Emerging Voices: New Works

In the Winter 2017 issue of *Canadian Art* magazine, a series of tarot cards are reproduced over several pages, each one picked by a different artist from their personal deck “to predict the future of art.” The first of the group is Los Angeles-based artist Hanna Hur’s selection, the Empress. “This is an exciting card to pull,” she writes. “I think the future for art is calling for more pleasure... Pleasure-driven thinking, talking, writing, making, looking, collaborating, etc.”

Hur’s prediction seemed to dangle overhead during Alicia Grant’s *TDT HOUSE OF DREAMS*, part of Toronto Dance Theatre’s *Emerging Voices* program, presented at the Winchester Street Theatre.

In fact, this pleasure principle was already present in rehearsal: one afternoon, Grant displays prospective costumes in a delicious array of pastel hues—a palette somewhere between Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* and the softly coloured Instagrams of artists like Arvida Byström, Monica Moraru, or Simon Fortin. As these intertexts signal, it’s an aesthetic that is equal parts delightful and timely—dancer Megumi Kokuba’s pants might even be described with the decidedly time-stamped moniker Millennial pink. But if, as *The Guardian* proclaims, “Millennial pink is the colour of now,” its present-tenseness acts more as a framing device than a comprehensive rule in Grant’s work. The pleasing colours that drape the dancers’ bodies form an aesthetic container for an even richer range of pleasurable movement and interaction, evidenced in minor gestures like the curl of dancer Justin de Luna’s grin below his turquoise-painted moustache.

Grant’s choreography builds through the often joyful ricochet of movement. “We have five minutes of bouncing,” Grant tells her dancers shortly before a run-through. And indeed, both the logic and the texture of the bounce seem central here, as gesture bounds and rebounds both within and between bodies. In some instances dancers pick up flicks

or contractions from one another; in others their bodies literally rebound through repeated koala bear jump catches.

Not only the body, but the gaze too, becomes enmeshed in this echoing exchange. While rehearsing a section of the piece wherein three dancers slowly shift postures, with one hand always framing their groin or behind, Grant remarks, “You’re just confronted with being a person, in front of people.” In other moments, the performers confront each other: intimately surveying the body of another, face gliding centimetres from the surface of forearms, shoulders, legs.

Emily Law’s *Mercury dust*, which shared the *Emerging Voices* program with *TDT HOUSE OF DREAMS*, also called on its dancers to turn toward their own, and each other’s, corporeality. The creative process integrated a practice that Law began when working on her 2016 solo *Wood*. She explains that the collaborators researched and sought to embody “the Traditional Chinese Elemental images that were connected to each person’s sign.” “Through this practice we devised a score for the artists to embody their element. Then we created a score for how the other artists would support each dancer’s experience of their element.”

Mercury dust progresses through a series of interchangeable episodes, ordered on the spot by the dancers themselves, as they deploy the infrastructure of the concert stage—lighting, projection, sound—to delineate spaces for one another to move through. The performance’s absorption of the theatre’s technical foundations might recall how Constantin Brancusi’s sculptural work “reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself,” as Rosalind Krauss writes in her well-known essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. Considering Brancusi’s sculpture *The Cock*, Krauss suggests that “the base becomes... the morphological generator of the figurative part of the object.” There may be a similar relationship between foundation and *choreographic* object



in *Mercury dust*. In one section, the dancers reframe the area that extends from the house-left entry, with a corridor of light. Here, the infrastructure of the theatre, itself a locus of choreography, re-spatializes the choreographic material of the dancers' movement. What's more, this arrangement of the stage space, what might conventionally be thought of as the analogue to sculpture's pedestal, actually influences the work on the level of gesture. In one moment, dancer Jarrett Siddall turns away from the audience, placing his gaze onto the crisp shadow of his body created by the specifically directional lighting. He seems to move almost in response, articulating his arm downward, something like a wave.

Krauss writes that in Brancusi's work, the sculptural form's absorption of the base redefines it, "as essentially transportable, the marker of the work's homelessness integrated into the very fiber of the sculpture." The synthesis of theatre space and choreography in Law's work, however, does something very different. Rather than rendering the work itinerant, this relationship roots it all the more deeply in place. Light sources and soundboards may become mobile for Law, yet they remain perpetually in relation to the Winchester Theatre's architecture. And this built space seems an essential home for Grant's choreography too. The large arch that anchors the centre of the stage's back wall—and which, at one point, frames the pulsating bodies of the work—seems as integral to the structure of the *TDT HOUSE OF DREAMS* as the invisible energetic matter that the dancers fluff-up, shape, and build during the piece.

A longstanding base for TDT, the Winchester Street Theatre evokes history. Yet it also houses emergence, futurity. Another premonition that Hur derives from her selection of the Empress is a call for "more feminine energy." Hur continues: "Feminine (please interpret broadly)—driven thinking, talking, writing, making, looking, collaborating, etc."

Indeed, as Akram Khan's misogyny-laden 2016 comments ("I don't want to say we should have more female choreographers for the sake of having more female choreographers.") keep echoing, as statistics show that women in dance continue to earn less than their male-identified counterparts, the invocation of the feminine that Hur sees in the cards feels especially crucial. And it is encouraging to imagine that emerging choreographic voices, like Grant's and Law's, might indeed propose some responses to the Empress' call.

Fabien Maltais-Bayda

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