

The New York Times

Between Birth and Death, Some Dancing and a Little Mystery

By MARINA HARSS AUG. 21, 2017



Maira Kalman and John Heginbotham at BAM Fisher.
Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times

There is a fine line between a deep love of life and a keen awareness of its ending. This zone of ambivalence is the natural habitat of the choreographer [John Heginbotham](#) and the artist [Maira Kalman](#).

She is a well-known illustrator, painter and writer. He is a former Mark Morris dancer who began creating his own quirky, surrealist dances shortly before retiring from the company in 2012. Both seem utterly sincere in their efforts to capture the odd scraps that others tend to dismiss as trivial or arcane, the traces of our passing presence in the world. It is upon these odds and ends that their dance-theater collaboration, “The Principles of Uncertainty,” is built.

Their roughly hour long piece will have its premiere at [Jacobs Pillow on Wednesday](#). (It comes to the [Brooklyn Academy of Music on Sept. 27](#).) The two met when Mr. Heginbotham was still dancing for Mark Morris and Ms. Kalman designed the set for his production of “Four Saints in Three Acts,” back in 2000. Sensing an affinity, Mr. Heginbotham proposed a collaboration, even though he admits he had no real idea of what he wanted to do. “How could you say no to such a beautiful request?,” she said recently, with a laugh.

Discussing the work after rehearsal in a dressing room at BAM Fisher, a black-box at the Brooklyn Academy, the two seemed to delight in each other’s company. He, in his mid-40s, has the gentle demeanor of a guidance counselor; she, in her 60s, is wry and funny, and tends to bounce from one topic to the next. The idea for their piece germinated, they explained, during a series of rambling conversations they had while walking around downtown New York, where she lives. Ms. Kalman is an inveterate walker: “For me,” she said, “walking brings out the most comfortable, the most natural part of how I think.”



A rehearsal of Maira Kalman and John Heginbotham’s dance-theater collaboration, “The Principles of Uncertainty,” at BAM Fisher. Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times

Her book “The Principles of Uncertainty,” which began as a [New York Times column](#), is a pictorial journal, reflecting her delight in the curious and the mundane. An entire chapter consists of photographs and gouaches of people’s backs as they walk down sidewalks or corridors, often weighed down by parcels and old age.

Touches of beauty — spiffy hats, cascades of bougainvillea, rococo arrangements of fruit — create oases of light and pleasure. What renders these images so poignant is their sense of impermanence. Beneath a drawing of her sister smiling in a pink hat, she writes: “What will happen to her? What will happen to us all?”

Mr. Heginbotham and Ms. Kalman’s mutual interest in gathering up images — “a basket of things we’ve fallen in love with,” as Mr. Heginbotham described them — supplied the content of their collaboration. Over three years, at various residencies, they developed their ideas into a series of vignettes, for which Mr. Heginbotham devised dances, which function almost as movement meditations. Ms. Kalman has been fascinated by the day-to-day work in the studio: “One of the things about this that I love is having the chance to watch the process of choreography, which I still don’t understand. I love being around dancers all day long.” She will also be a presence onstage, sitting quietly on the sides, walking, speaking, drawing.

Mr. Heginbotham’s dances for “Principles” are like the found objects that fill Kalman’s book; slightly off-kilter, delicate, vulnerable feeling. “There is a larger theme around it, which is death,” Mr. Heginbotham explained, “and then inside that frame you can have a teeny French dance, and some Brazilian music, and something done in silence. Dancing is one of the things that could happen between life and death.” (“Principles” has already inspired a [song cycle](#) for countertenor by the young New York composer Nico Muhly.)

There is quite a bit of dancing in “Principles,” lilting waltzes and achingly slow couple dances, as well as small ensembles in which the dancers seem to perform less for the audience than for each other. This is a quality Mr. Heginbotham encourages: “I want to see something that feels spontaneous,” he told them as the rehearsal began, “I want to feel like it’s just happening.”



The choreography is both pared-down and precise, woven through with gestures and flourishes so specific and odd that you can't help but wonder what inspired them. One, a slinky shake of the shoulders with the hands held in front of the chest in fists, was lifted from Mr. Heginbotham's vague recollections of Gwen Verdon dancing "[Whatever Lola Wants](#)" in the movie "Damn Yankees!," choreographed by Bob Fosse. (His version, it must be said, feels much more innocent.) In another section, the dancers orbit around each other at varying speeds; one of them flips his hand repeatedly as he walks on tiptoe, as if swishing a tail, adding a trill to the end of each phrase.

The piece is set to a musical playlist assembled and arranged — for accordion, flute, violin, cello and voice — by the violinist and composer Colin Jacobsen. Among the selections are an easygoing dance by the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, a Hungarian folk tune, a mariachi song and some Schubert. Like everything else in the show, the orchestration has a homespun feel. "The accordion provides this incredible harmonic glue," Mr. Jacobsen said by phone earlier this month from Tanglewood, "but also conjures up the folk world. I think the classical pieces might reveal their folkier roots."

Ms. Kalman's brightly colored drawings and simple embroidery provide the décor. And the audience's seats have slipcovers hand-stitched with phrases like "a platter of frogs" and "he even brought a hat." Eventually, the act of drawing itself becomes the main attraction; each brush stroke will be projected onto a screen behind Ms. Kalman as she draws live whatever comes to mind. She also designed the simple costumes, with help from Maile Okamura, a friend of Mr. Heginbotham's from the Mark Morris Dance Group and also Mr. Jacobsen's wife. It's all in the family.

The spoken text comes mostly from the book, and consists, in the main, of Ms. Kalman's reciting short weather reports that feel more emotional than climate-related. Here's her entry for March 15: "Pensive air, pensive gloom, gloomy pensive gloom, gray gloomy gloopy grime. Clearing later." As the show progresses, the dancing gives way to words. One member of the cast, Daniel Pettrow (also assistant director), bridges the divide. He speaks, but also dances a solo while wearing a gray suit, an image lifted from Ms. Kalman's book.

I was curious about the meaning of this lonesome dance. The man in gray represents "a distant relative," Ms. Kalman wrote in an email, who "wanted to impress a woman. So he threw salt on the floor and did this strange dance. Why he thought she would like it is a mystery."

Like so many things in this intimate work and in life, the image feels both private — unknowable — and oddly familiar.

A version of this article appears in print on August 23, 2017, on Page C2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Basket of Vignettes Between Birth and Death.

Original link:

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/arts/dance/principles-of-uncertainty-maira-kalman-john-heginbotham.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fdance&action=click&contentCollection=dance®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=sectionfront&_r=0