

The Next Step

Every wall is a door, they say. After a serious accident on-stage midway through opening night at her last New York season 10 months ago, Molissa Fenley managed her return to the stage - at Playhouse 91, November 29 through December 7 - by having other soloists perform half her program. This necessary strategy offered a wonderful opportunity to see material sprung from Fenley's body on markedly different anatomies and temperaments. Fenley is small and squared-off, like a piece of early Mayan sculpture, while the extraordinary Canadian soloist Peggy Baker, who performed Fenley's 1991 *Inner Enchantments*, is a big-boned, long-limbed woman with a small, elegant head. The only trait she shares with Fenley is stamina, which was certainly required by this hypnotic exercise in perpetual locomotion decorated with sinuous port de bras. Fenley's 1993 *Tilliboyo*, a blend of tropical rhythms and mudralike gestures, was given to a man, Michele Pogliani, who increased its wit with deadpan dignity. Like *Inner Enchantments*, the new *Savanna* was created for Baker, but it is post-injury and much more Baker than Fenley, as if Fenley's incapacity had made the choreographer more aware of physical possibilities other than her own. It's a terrific piece, built from huge, abstractly dramatic moves, many of them co-opted from classical ballet and ingeniously employed. Baker, a fabulous mover - fluid, swift, and emphatically clear - did the piece full justice, it, in turn, reads as an homage to the grand scale of her physique and projection.

The latter half of the program was devoted to *Regions*. Fenley's choreographic diary of her ongoing recovery. "Choir", the first of its three sections, is a stunning illustration of the fact that a body rendered partially inarticulate will explore the abilities remaining to it with rich obsession. Here Fenley confined to an old-fashioned wooden office armchair, extends antenna-like limbs into the space that was once her domain without question. Her head and neck are eloquent, and the expression on her face is riveting and poignant - full of pain and the over-coming of pain that is motivated by a passionate appetite for life. Also evident is a curious wonder, as if the dancer were repeatedly discovering that stillness and action are not opposites after all. Somewhat less compelling, the subsequent sections, "Ocean Walk" and "Mesa", gave us a figure who could walk again and plunge into sumptuous balances, but who did not yet dare run or leap or whirl.

If you consider Fenley simply as a performer, this concert was not so much a comeback as a coming back, a recovery in progress. If you think of her as a choreographer, *Savanna* and "Choir" suggest that she has arrived.

-Tobi Tobias