

# Dance

## An obsessive miniaturist teases, baffles

By Mindy Aloff

*Splitting* is a 1 1/2-hour, eight-part suite of kinetic monologues, delivered in a delicate body English by San Francisco dancer and video artist, Margaret Fisher. Fisher performed it to a rapt audience at Moving Space Inc. on April 22, in a program that included an excerpt from her latest work, *Between Seaweed and the Star*, as well as two haunting pieces of music, which she composed.

A tall woman with long, beautifully formed thighs and fine, lively hands, Fisher would be a striking presence were she merely to walk around the room, and there were moments when she engaged in repetitive motion that simple. At one point she methodically splashed her face with water about 30 times, then, as methodically, dried her hands. Later, an entire section consisted of her carefully scratching her left ankle with her right foot. But these obsessions functioned as widely spaced rests between some of the most marvelous episodes of small-scale dancing we are likely to see all year.

In *Splitting*, Fisher works as a miniaturist, focusing primarily on the outer extremities—fingers, toes, neck and head—and boiling down virtuosity into extremely difficult yet nearly imperceptible shifts of weight. You could mistake what she does for miming, or for a refined sort of signing for the deaf. (The Hindu scribe in the *Seaweed* excerpt is, in fact, entirely mimed.)

Unlike the gestures of mime, those of *Splitting* evade literal references. You can't translate them, as you can, for example, the actions of Marcel Marceau's Bip. ("He is running a great distance." "He is trapped in a shrinking room.") You can only paraphrase highlights of the gestural stream. A palm brought to the nose suggests, in context, the discovery of smell. A palm resting on the pelvis suggests the discovery of gender.

*Splitting* teases us to search for literal meanings even as it baffles us in finding them. During the course of the piece, Fisher adopts three basic costumes, two of which she continues to pare down. There's a white smock overlaid with a white apron and set off by a round black hat, blood-red leg warmers and, as a left glove, a whole fresh chicken. And there's a black leotard, with black ballet slippers, black surgical mask and a black fabric carapace tied around the lower spine. And a gold burnous, in which the left hand is muffled, with gold harem pants and the surgical mask.

It's tempting to think of these as fixed personae—butcher, insect, alambique—then to let the personae



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make sense of the dances. ("The butcher is shadow-boxing with the chicken." "The insect is trying to scratch out its eye.") But it's not the most productive way to look. *Splitting* thrives on its paradoxes. When Fisher, in the burnous, casually lies on her back and immodestly flips up a white bib to expose her belly, you can see it as a sign of birth, heat, idleness, vacancy, revelation—or a lovely posture of ease.

Although each of its parts draws on a bank of preselected gestures and steps, much of *Splitting* is improvised. And although it contains heart-stopping images, what carry our interest are the clear, surprising phrases. Fisher seems to invent rhythm as she goes. Her sense of how to show it to us—how to group her phrases into "sentences" and her sentences into "paragraphs"—gives her dancing the character of speech without its telling us any news more explicit than, "I am dancing." Traits recur: a (for me, disturbing) tendency to isolate one side of the body from another, a reluctance to

lose touch with a central axis, a preference for thoughtfully gathering in, rather than boldly striking out. Again, it's tempting to read these backwards as personality or temperament. But the invention doesn't need to be accounted for to be enjoyed.

People sometimes ask me what is required to start a major ballet company, apart from a choreographer of genius, a brilliant general manager and a great deal of money. I don't believe I could find views more sensible on this subject than those expressed by Kent Stowell, artistic director and resident choreographer of Seattle's newly renamed Pacific Northwest Ballet Company.

Stowell and his wife, Francis Russell (associate artistic director and director of the school), took over PNWB last year after a series of administrative and financial upheavals. Both have strong ties to the New York City Ballet, where they were soloists (Russell was NYCB's ballet mistress as well).

Whether they can guide PNWB's

unevenly talented, still largely inexperienced group of dancers to "major" status remains to be seen. Their course consists of keeping the dancers before the public (PNWB is now on the Dance Touring Program) in programs that include Balanchine classics (*Concerto Barocco*, *The Four Temperaments*), romantic revivals (*Coppelia*, *The Nutcracker*) and new works by Stowell and other up-and-coming choreographers, in addition to looking carefully at the school as a breeding ground for future dancers.

I interviewed Stowell in a wing of the Opera House during April where he was recovering from a matinee which he had just emceed for elementary school children.

"The relationship between a school and a company is a very important thing," Stowell said. "Take *L'Heure Bleue* [A Stowell work to Ravel's Piano Trio, given its American premiere by PNWB in April]. The music is so complicated, full of uneven counts. When I made it [for a German ballet company] I had to have the dancers memorize every measure. They felt very

insecure and I had to coax them into it. Here in Seattle, the dancers got very nervous because they couldn't get a hold on the music. But the kids at the school are watching it, studying it. In five years they won't find the piece very difficult at all.

"Some day I'd like to do a full-length *Swan Lake*. No one on the West Coast has done one, and although everyone calls it a warhorse, I think, by 1978, that we're ready to look at it seriously. In a company like The Royal Ballet, the girls at the school grow up looking at ballerinas in *Swan Lake*. They take a little bit from this one, a little from that one, so that when they, themselves, have to cope with Odette/Odile they have a fairly decent conception of the role."

How long would he estimate it would take PNWB's school to produce an Odette/Odile?

"Well, I don't know about that. If we started from scratch now—with the children now entering—we could have, oh, a starlet in eight years. That would be a rare situation, though. What often happens is that a number of talents get weeded out, a lot of underneath people who aren't mature enough to cope with something like a full-length ballet. The amazing ones—Gelsey Kirkland, Joyce Cuoco—are those who can."

"I want children to start coming to see the company, and I want our dancers to be able to see a lot of ballet. I also want to get our public used to looking at ballets more than once. That's why the March programs closed with *The Four Temperaments* (staged by Francis Russell) and the May ones will open with it. I also want to wean the audience away from the idea of guest stars, and not to get into the trap of expecting four new masterpieces at each performance, even though right now we're expected to do new works every time. If a new piece is successful, OK, but it's the process of growth—for the audience and the dancers—that's important."

"In *Coppelia*, which we'll perform in June, I'm going to be as traditional as I can. I'm not a story choreographer myself and I don't like to mess around with famous ballets. There's a trend with choreographers today to intellectualize ballet. That's important for the choreographer's own process, but the fascinating idea often gets lost on stage. The Germans do this a lot—turn familiar ballets upside down. If you want to write a new story, maybe you should be a writer."

"It's important for us to be productive, and to establish our relationship with Seattle. The Northwest ought to have a major ballet company, like Pennsylvania's or San Francisco's. As it is, Seattle is behind Salt Lake, which has a smaller population."

If Stowell could get one choreographer to make a piece for the company, with money no object, whom would he choose?

"Fred Astaire, no question. Astaire was and still is America's greatest dancer. If he were in the least bit inclined to be a choreographer, I would knock myself out to get him up here."