



A matter of time: Toyoji Tomita and Taro Saito perform in Margaret Fisher's "The True and False Occult," which plays with the concepts of time, symmetry and zero gravity.

ARTFUL INTELLECT

Margaret Fisher combines the intellectual and the sensual to create performance pieces that are both demanding and dazzling

By Rita Feldman

MARGARET FISHER is not one of your more easily accessible artists. Yet once you have seen her perform, you cannot forget that elegant, elongated body with its exaggerated limbs moving in tiny encapsulated gestures that seem to be propelled by an energy from deep inside her being. Standing quite still, assuming a serene pose once in a while, this dancer keeps her feet firmly planted on the floor, looking like a healthy Giacometti sculpture. "I don't travel through space because I haven't found a reason to do so," she explains.

Looking at her the other day in the tiny Emeryville studio she shares with her composer/conductor husband Robert Hughes, a collaborator in most of her pieces, she looked almost ordinary except for a finely chiseled profile with a long, graceful neck and crystalline blue eyes. Dumped black shorts, a nondescript tank top, hair that's beginning to show some silver piled into a disintegrating bun on top of her head, she was dissecting the dress rehearsal of her latest piece, a reworking of the 1980 *The True and False Occult*.

Between then and the final run-through, she would have to work a part-time job, repaint the scenery, sew the costumes, find some props, go through various spot-checks with individual performers (Toyoji Tomita, Taro Saito and Dominica Kriz) and rescue some of the slides she has so painstakingly assembled.

It may be a familiar story for artists who work on the edge of the mainstream, but it still doesn't seem far that after working for ten years, performing and lecturing in this country and abroad, being awarded six NEA grants and numerous commissions and residencies both here and abroad (mainly Italy and Japan, countries

whose influences show up again and again in her work) Fisher would still have to repaint her own corrugated cardboard folding sets. Yet she seems to take it in stride as the price for one who has insisted on pursuing her own vision about what it means to move, both her own body and the theatrical, visual and musical elements she has chosen to incorporate into her dance work.

Fisher has developed a reputation for multimedia pieces that are demanding puzzles, tightly structured and pervaded by a stillness and internal quiet that is almost meditative. Her works touch on philosophy, poetry, painting, astronomy and mathematics from both the Eastern and Western traditions. It helps to have a liberal education that supposedly teaches you to perceive relationships between disparate areas of knowledge, but she insists—correctly, I think—that it's not necessary. You can enjoy her shows on a purely sensual level.

In Fisher's *Vice Versa*, premiered last fall in the "Seeing Time Series" at the Black Repertory Theater in Berkeley, references to Dante, Nietzsche, Aristotle, St. Thomas, Joyce and Giotto were flying by so fast that even students of the history of ideas would have to have all their referential antennae out to catch what was going on. And yet it was visually so beautiful that you were riveted to your seat. There were wonderful masks, a set reminiscent of a Giotto painting, a narrator (puppeteer and vocal artist extraordinaire Larry Reed) who spun a sonorous web around you, two enigmatic prophesies from Libya and Cumae (that's east of Naples, in case you forgot your geography), a giant black bodybuilder who played the Minotaur and finally the exquisitely beautiful Fisher as a satyr. But what did it all mean?

According to the program notes, the piece was about "the Western lineage

of ideas, images, words and sounds: The lineage that came from Eden—by way of Egypt, Libya, Crete, Rome and Florence—the expulsion from the garden through the flowerings of Western Civilization." Not exactly the kind of stuff you take in after a hard day at the beach. The unabashed intellectualism was intimidating, but the show was also totally captivating in the way it moved and glided through time as if on slippery slippers. You sensed that there was a mind at work that manipulated the important ideas even if you could catch on to only half of them. The work stayed with you long after you left the theater somewhat in frustration, wishing you had paid better attention in those Great Ideas classes.

It's an issue that Fisher, an articulate and thoughtful artist, is perfectly aware of. However, she says that "We don't think of this as a problem. I know that it doesn't answer the audiences' discomfort... but the way Bob and I look at it is not as a problem but as an art form that can handle a second viewing. That's not a generally common way to go to performances, but we are pushing the point. We are saying, 'If there is a lot, and you missed it and you want to pick it up, come again.'" This is said without the slightest trace of arrogance or condescension toward her viewers. "But in the meantime, we feel that we provide enough audiovisual stimulation in the pieces that when you come and feel that the references are flying by and you are not catching hold of them, ride the piece through for the stimulation that the pieces are providing. It is sequenced specifically to do that."

Fisher thinks that the difficulty some people have with her works is more of what she calls a "California problem" than one inherent in the pieces themselves. Referring to literary sources or referring to other people's work, she says, "is common enough in every art form, though not common in a California aesthetic."

Pushed on the question of what constitutes "California aesthetics," Fisher demurs. "It is a California way of creating in the use of the elements being equal. That's very California. That's where we learned our technique. But it's not California in the content. So form and content come from two different places and we put them together." She believes that Californians (and New Yorkers) basically want a linear narrative structure in a work, if it is content-oriented.

Not that all of Fisher's work has the complexity of *Vice Versa*. For *Room of D's*, which she premiered at New Langton Gallery this spring and then reworked for The Lab's "100% Concentrated Dance" series, she took a one-sentence Cocteau story about a chameleon who gets moved to a plaid cloth and eventually dies. Sitting about three feet from Fisher, who danced practically the whole piece without displacing her feet, we were drawn in to a movement vocabulary that focused on the torso and upper body. Often she looked very flat and two-dimensional. With her long arms she would carefully circumscribe the air space around her, sometimes only pushing the index finger and the thumb together on an extended arm, or twich a muscle on an inclined head, or roll her eyes the way Kathak dancers do. The experience was entrancing, but also so intimate that you felt like a peeping Tom intruding into a private world.

Fisher doesn't mind. "I want you to feel like a voyeur," she says. "I want to break the presentation of dance as an idealized form where so much is tied up with the 'good.' Everything is good; the posture is good; the people are in great shape; that can do anything. We don't live like that. Our world is based on knowing that things are uncertain and that our values may change in ten years. As a dancer I would prefer a relationship with an audience in which the person who looks at us sees through the surface

and into what we do and asks, 'What did they do and how did that happen?'"

Fisher has created a "cellular movement style," as she calls it, from her research into contact improvisation. "The thrust [of her dancing] is not to create patterns in space or to define space by movement," she says. "Contact improvisation ideally sets the ego aside, which allows the energy impulse inside the body to go wherever it wants. So I developed a technique to create a certain amount of energy and then allow it to go." Furthermore, she continues, "All the movement comes from the joint, because the loose and flexible joint is the facilitator for the energy to move wherever it wants through the body." She feels that with the reworking of the *Room of D's* this movement research has been concluded, and now she is ready to "play with all that material."

In *The True and False Occult*, Fisher's most widely performed multimedia piece (having been presented all over the country in addition to Italy and Canada), Fisher plays around with symmetry, time and zero gravity. What if we had a metric calamity? What if there was no gravity? What if there were no horizon lines? It also contains such tangibles as floating heads, a corrugated Mt. Fuji, a fisherman fishing kites, Fisher swimming in a mylar pool, bunraku sacred music, teacups pouring words, Japanese calligraphy, a Humphrey Bogart-like smoker, Fisher dancing a slide duet with a Hughes flute and cello piece—it's all there and it hangs together in a way that you may not exactly understand, but that makes sense in an intuitive sort of way.

"Sure," Fisher smiles, "we want intellectual engagement, but otherwise, let the spectacle go before your eyes and just enjoy the dazzle of the lights or the whatever." ■

The True and False Occult will be performed Sept. 22nd, 23rd, 29th and 30th at The Lab, 1805 Divisadero, SF.