



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Words, and their powerful influences

BY LEWIS SEGAL

JULY 30, 2005 12 AM PT

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Three nonlinear text-driven performance pieces artfully evoked feelings still in flux, not ready to be objectified, on the second program of the multidisciplinary NOW (New Original Works) Festival, Thursday at the REDCAT downtown.

Simone Forti's imaginative four-character dance drama "Unbuttoned Sleeves" used a quote from a Japanese Noh master about "words flung down like pine needles," and that phrase would have worked equally well for the pieces by Sara Wookey and Rodney Mason.

Wookey actually did fling words down in "Love's Geography: Revisited," rearranging them on an opaque projector until they became one more statement about a relationship placed on indefinite hold by many degrees of separation.

Indeed, in essence her solo portrayed a profound act of evasion, using talk of international travel -- of the contrast between cities on different continents -- to conceal the exquisite futility of a love affair going nowhere.

NOW publicity mentioned Amsterdam and Los Angeles as the specific places obsessing Wookey, but Peggy Phelan's text emphasized the link between emotional and geographical alienation -- of living in two places but most of all in a void somewhere between. And that can happen anywhere.

Mason's deliberately fragmentary "Origins of Man" solo repeatedly used the word "nigger" in his text and in mile-high letters on a projection screen to get at the heart of what he called "the psychological effects of the African American experience."

Adopting black street style as camouflage, assuming a flashy/trashy role he described as the "numero uno game player" and using video clips to recall a drug-induced brush with the law, he seemed bent on justifying all the hate aimed at him.

But quotes from Shakespeare, sudden "accidental" revelations of sensitivity and talent galore told another story. As directed and choreographed by Rennie Harris, "Origins of Man" depicted the emergence of an artist: an angry, erudite seer ready to goad the rest of us toward his hard-won awareness.

As for Forti, she cast herself in the roles of bird-woman and child-woman to get at the most serious issues from a deceptively whimsical children's theater perspective. A child's view of burial, for instance, or memories of a dangerous border crossing early in her life became sugarcoated theater games: initially sweet but potent in their aftereffects.

The war in Iraq kept returning as a central point of discussion, directly confronted in remarks by Terrence Luke Johnson playing an addled prophet fixated on the past. But Sarah Swenson also invoked a war mentality in her satiric speech about one of the least celebrated opportunities that feminist equality allows: "I can bayonet your head

Swenson performed most of the sustained dancing in the piece, while Johnson stayed pretty much rooted in gesticulation and Forti flitted from place to place. Composer Douglas Wadle added a different movement texture by roaming the stage while supplying mournful horn-calls.

Local audiences have become accustomed to seeing Forti perform pithy

improvisational solos fusing talk and motion, current events and atmospheric reminiscences. Without abandoning these priorities, “Unbuttoned Sleeves” proved that this pioneer of postmodernism can still surprise us at age 70.

\*

NOW Festival

Where: REDCAT at Walt Disney Concert Hall, at West 2nd and South Hope streets, downtown L.A.

When: 8:30 tonight

Price: \$14 to \$18

Contact: (213) 237-2800 or [www.redcat.org](http://www.redcat.org)