

old photographs in their original locations in and around San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts to comment on the intertwined nature of present and past. *Illumination* never explicitly engaged the location's history or story in the way Carlson's work does. Although attention to the specific history of the plant might have created a more layered, complex performance, *Illumination* successfully explored space and scale, offered striking visual images and moments of spectacle, and caused the audience to see the space in a new way.

The vast interior of the Seaholm Power Plant resembles an airline hangar, but Jacques wrote in the program notes that the architecture inspired her to view the plant as "a magnificent, grand cathedral." Enormously high ceilings captured air thick with smoke from a fog machine, and windows revealed an especially pink sunset outside. The audience sat in chairs arranged in rows while the plant's enormous interior stretched out before them. The dancers appeared throughout the piece in varying degrees of distance from the spectator, constantly shifting the audience's sense of scale.

Illumination offered memorable visual images and arresting moments when dancers defied gravity. At the opening, lights bathed the back of the building, which was extremely far away from the audience, in an amber glow. Seven dancers hung, suspended by cables, against the sixty-five-foot back wall like marionettes; their bodies moved slowly and not in unison. Twirling and performing back bends at a precipitously dangerous height, their shadows loomed behind them larger than their bodies, creating a sense of seeing double. The dancers could be angels, puppets, or celestial acrobats. They began to descend, hanging by their feet, as though diving headfirst into the abyss. Then solo dancer Nicole Whiteside appeared in the middle of the vast gap between the audience and the back wall. She appeared to fly and then sleep on a bed of air, her body caught between beams of white and yellow light.

Artful design elements, such as Jason Amato's lighting, heightened the production's sense of theatricality. At times, Amato's spectacular color combinations thrilled the eye, while at other moments, the lighting created intimacy by shrinking the space. In a striking moment of spectacle, a giant white ball rose into the air like a child's balloon forlornly drifting across the sky. Then lighting transformed it into a round, full moon. A dancer emerged, suspended, lit in a spectrum of color. In this playful solo, a pulley moved Laura Cannon gracefully through the air while she reveled in the expanded space. *Illumination* never created a discernable narrative; instead, the dancers reappeared in different locations and in

different combinations, suggesting a multiplicity of stories and possibilities for meaning.

Although companies such as Project Bandaloop and Zaccho Dance Theatre have made aerial dance popular in San Francisco, only Blue Lapis Light currently creates site-specific aerial dance in Texas, drawing crowds to slightly dangerous or off-limits areas—opening ways of seeing these spaces anew. The Seaholm Power Plant, for example, was built in the 1950s and used to supply the city with over 120 megawatts of energy. But the city closed the plant in 1989 because it no longer was profitable. For years it remained empty and desolate, even though being slated for eventual public use as a mixed-use hotel, retail, and residential space. Jacques, inspired by its scale, struggled for months to convince the city to let her company perform there, working to bring the building up to code for the audience's safety. Before *Illumination*, the building was still an empty shell of its former self, but during the piece, the skilled dancers and dramatic lighting gave it a jolt of energy. Dancers' flying bodies transformed the plant and inspired the audience to see beauty in a most unlikely place.

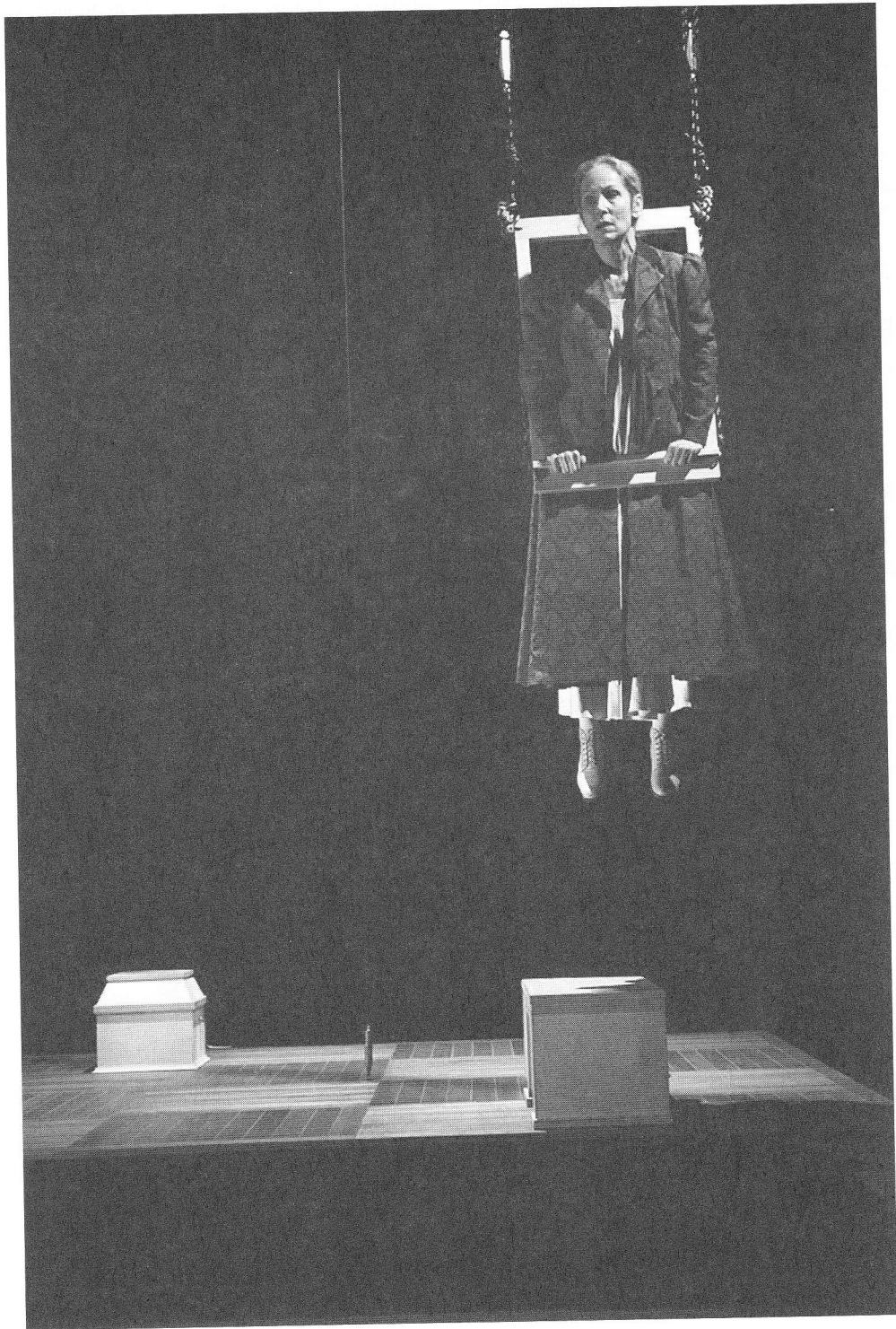
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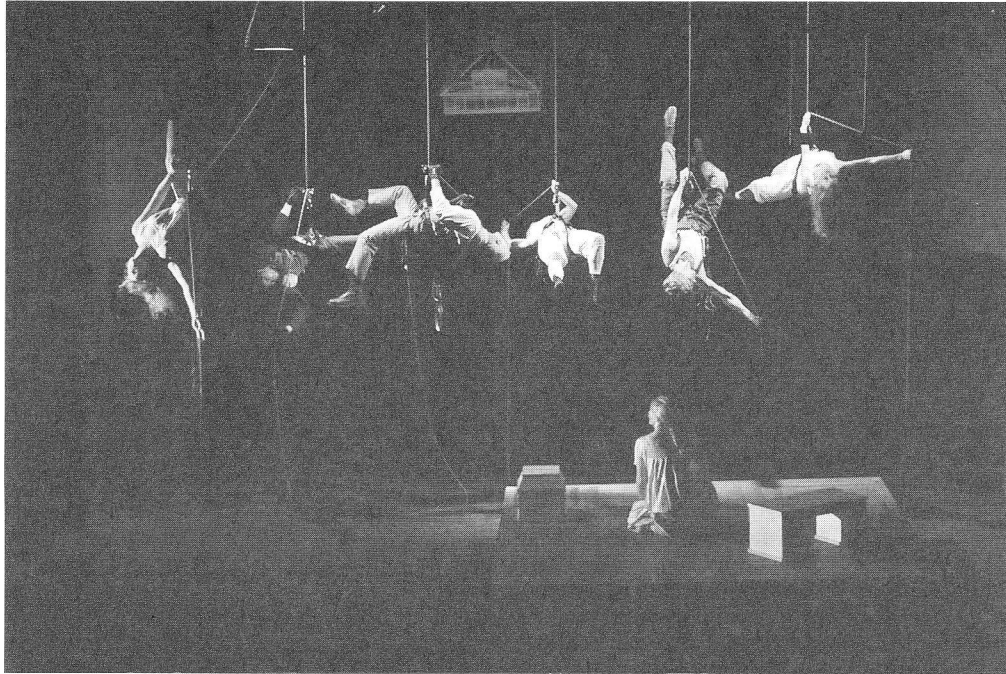
GRAVITY. By Steven Pearson and Robyn Hunt. Directed by Steven Pearson. Pacific Performance Project/east, Connelly Theatre, New York City. 7 December 2007.

Gravity, an original production conceived by Pacific Performance Project/east (P3 east), a physical acting company based in Columbia, South Carolina, reunited the audience with Chekhov's Lyubovh Ranevskaya, alone in her Paris flat, five years after the sale of her cherry orchard. It was neither a deconstruction of Chekhov's work nor a reinvention of his classic text, but rather a physical exploration of the psyche of Ranevskaya after she has returned to Paris at the end of the play, broken, impoverished, and emotionally defeated. This well-known character provided the jumping-off point from which the company created an entirely new piece, one that imagines how she might have been affected by the artistic and scientific breakthroughs that defined Paris in the early twentieth century as she struggled to exorcise the demons of her past.

The creators—Steven Pearson, who conceived and directed, and Robyn Hunt, who wrote the text and also played Ranevskaya—combined the strengths of the company's innovative physical actors with



Robin Hunt (Ranevskaya) in *Gravity*. Photo: Gerry Goodstein.



Gravity. Photo: Gerry Goodstein.

powerful and inventive text, and in so doing found a new means to a Chekhovian end: the exploration of the psychology of a character. By grounding their physical choices in the reality of what Mme. Ranevskaya would be facing—the historical 1910 flooding of the Seine that traps her in her flat, leaving her alone with her thoughts and regrets at the end of her life—they were able to manifest physically her inner psyche and achieve something far greater than a simple narrative sequel or a postmodern exercise. We were left with images, both haunting and revelatory, rooted in historical context and the laws of the physical world while being set free by gravity-defying set, staging, and dance.

The play takes place in the mind and memory of Ranevskaya, and it is here that we see many of Chekhov's characters: Anya, Lopakhin, Gaev, Varya, Dunyasha, and Firs. Through both recalled and imagined conversations with these characters, Ranevskaya reflects on the major cultural awakenings and scientific revelations happening in the world at the time. Of particular interest to her is Einstein's recently published relativity theory, which denounces the previously accepted ideas of time, space, and gravity, and she desperately tries to comprehend it in an attempt to understand and perhaps reverse the events of her past. Pearson directed the piece with the gleam of an impassioned physics profes-

sor in his eye, laying out large-scale experiments before us. From the effect of gravity on objects falling from the sky as playfully rendered by a group of large red balls that poured onto the platform and bounced in every direction, to the predictable motion of the swinging pendulum as exhibited through the carpenter's plumb, to a platform that transformed from a stationary playing space into a lever-and-fulcrum apparatus upon which Ranevskaya and others tenuously balanced, we watched as students of this physical world.

The set, designed by Pearson, was necessarily minimal, considering the intense physicality of the production. The aforementioned square platform sat two feet off the ground, supported by wooden posts at all four corners, within the bare and exposed space of the empty theatre. A bench and gramophone perched upon the platform, and suspended above it were a window frame and a carpenter's plumb hung from a line. It was from this platform that Ranevskaya spent the entirety of the play while the company of actors moved around and above her. The platform served not only as her apartment but also her physical mind, and, trapped in both, she attempted to control those around her like a puppeteer. Also visible was the alpine rigging that the company used to ascend and descend vertically in the space, as well as two low-flying trapezes.

The actors brought an impressive amount of emotional depth to their characters, given the extreme physical demands of the show. If there is a particular strength in this company, it is finding those inner connections through physical means. At the beginning, Ranevskaya (Robin Hunt) hung suspended high above the stage in the window frame, supporting herself much as a pair of rings might a gymnast, as she recounted a written correspondence with Anya (Lee Fitzpatrick). Her inner pain and desperation were fully evident, yet Hunt executed this impressive physical feat with ease. It was a powerful moment that set the tone for the entire piece.

Dance, a primary element of the production, served the overall intent of the piece well. In P3's imagining, Ranevskaya derives a great deal of influence from the performances of the celebrated Ballet Russes, a Russian company performing in Paris at the time. Known for pushing the established boundaries of ballet, it proved to be a fitting artistic complement to Einstein's theory. In *Gravity*, fellow company member Peter Kyle's choreography incorporated different styles of dance—both on the ground and in the air—including a beautiful pas de deux staged on low-flying trapezes. From the joy in Ranevskaya watching excerpts of Nijinsky's celebrated performances to a mournful tango with Sasha, her estranged lover, time and again her inner joys and sorrows were on display.

Freeing the players from the titular pull of earth's forces, Pearson created breathtaking imagery throughout the production. In the show's most haunting moment, the drowning of Grisha (Ichiro Hayashi), we saw him suspended from his waist by a climbing harness attached to a lateral rope and drawn horizontally across the entire space in slow motion; his body hung limp and swung free as if floating breathlessly beneath the river's surface. In the final scene, we saw the entire company of major characters ascend the ropes, which lined the rear of the space. There were no hidden tricks. The climbing-harnesses the actors used were visible outside their clothes as were their carabineers, ascenders, and ropes—the common tools of rock climbers. Yet the company moved with a grace and physical adeptness that never detracted from the story nor removed us from the time in which the play is set. During this scene, the platform on which Ranevskaya stood also took flight, supported by cables at all four corners. In this moment, she seemed to free herself from her past, suspended in time and space, defying gravity.

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BLAHBLAHBLAHBANG (A PISTOL FIT IN ONE ACT). By Matt Starritt, with the W.E.T. Ensemble. Directed by Jennifer Zeyl. Washington Ensemble Theatre, On the Boards, Seattle. 15 December 2007.

I knew that this contemporary, devised adaptation of Ibsen's classic *Hedda Gabler* would feature the fierce and irreverent approach to theatre-making that has earned Washington Ensemble Theatre (W.E.T.) its reputation as one of the most exciting emerging companies in Seattle, when the pre-show announcement warned against cell-phone interruptions with sounds of pistol shots mixed with ringtones and the words "shut the fuck up." Formed during one of Jon Jory's classes at the University of Washington School of Drama's MFA program, and now in its fourth season, W.E.T. faced its first opportunity to present its distinct performance style to a larger audience through On the Board's Northwest Artist Series. Based on its playful receptive lens by means of performance-space configuration, fragmented shifts in time and space, nonhierarchical, or horizontal, structuring of design and performance elements, a pastiche of performance languages, self-reflexivity, and emphasis on storytelling through imagery and movement rather than the narrative itself, I would describe W.E.T.'s performance style as highly physicalized postmodern play.

As emphasized by the title, W.E.T. had no interest in doing *Hedda Gabler*; rather, it *did with* this classic to rework Hedda's tragedy for today's audience. By placing a large bank of seats upstage facing the rest of the audience seated in the house, it transformed a traditional proscenium theatre into an alley stage, with the audience on two sides. At times, when all of the actors' backs faced one side or the other, W.E.T. forced me to view the play reflected in the faces of other audience members, stressing the distant and fractured nature of adapting a nineteenth-century text. Viewing the production through this lens of multiple audience members' reactions encouraged me to focus on the theatricality of the ensemble's storytelling rather than the story itself; it also mirrored the pluralism of authorship inherent in devised work.

Instead of shying away from this *differance*, W.E.T. engaged it directly, opting for postmodern flux with time and space. Design elements, performance style, and text equally—or horizontally—aimed to abstractly merge Ibsen's world with ours; no single element dominated. For example, two large walls with second-story windows angled up and out from the flat stage at both ends, creating a skewed, keystone-shaped playing space. Designers Lathrop Walker and Jennifer Zeyl painted the walls with