

## Time Traveler

PORTLAND, OREGON 09.30.10



Left: View of The Wooster Group's *There Is Still Time . . . Brother*. (Photo: Wayne Bund) Right: Japanther playing TBA:10 opening night at the Works. (Photo: Gordon Wilson)

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE sitting in a dark room, watching a graphic sex tape.

Especially when you're surrounded by a dozen or so strangers, a spotlight beaming down on your chair, everyone well aware that you alone have decided the crowd should watch Paris Hilton and her boyfriend go to town.

Turns out, the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte is right: It really is easier to watch murder in public than porn. Her point was proved at this month's Time-Based Art Festival, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's annual smorgasbord of durational work. The Woosters' 360-degree interactive video installation *There Is Still Time . . . Brother*, one of dozens of offerings spread over a ten-day art marathon, allows a single viewer to control the panoramic camera's eye, moving among interwoven narratives driven by Kate Valk, Scott Shepherd, and Ari Fliakos. The video's themes revolve largely around war (including actual combat footage, much easier to focus on than Ms. Hilton), exploring what we choose to look at, what we avoid, and how our behavior changes when other people are watching us.

"I wanted people to have to make choices, in public," LeCompte explained at a chat, the same one where she noted the death v. sex rule. The resulting installation is dizzying, equal parts pleasure and discomfort. Though the work itself is recorded, the action is live: The audience member in the hot seat builds a solo performance, simultaneously controlling and being controlled by the video. It's improvisational, theatrical artifice at its finest.

So went many of TBA:10's offerings, which were chosen by the festival's guest artistic director, Cathy Edwards (who will continue until 2011). Solos dominated the performance lineup, from Jérôme Bel's Cédric Andrieux, a quiet rumination on the eponymous dancer's life, to *The Agony and the Ecstasy* of Steve Jobs, Mike Daisey's bombastic monologue on the seamy side of technology. The best were shows in which, as Edwards put it, artists "created an intimate space for the self to be shared." And, I would add, hidden. Contrived intimacy has a very small bull's-eye, one that a surprising number of the shows hit.



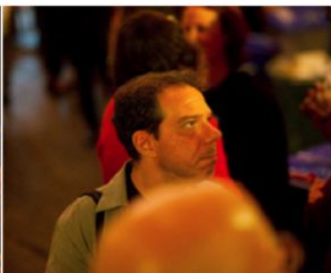
Left: View of Maria Hassabi's *SoloShow*. (Photo: Rio) Right: View of Mike Daisey's *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*. (Photo: Gordon Wilson)

One such was Maria Hassabi's *SoloShow*, which feels like the culmination of a long, fraught investigation. Occupying a low platform in the Imago Theatre, Hassabi funneled her honed frame through a cycle of poses culled from art history and popular culture, embodying and making strange iconic female stances. Held in James Lo's ambient soundscape and lit in one of Joe Levasseur's typically lush designs, she was ours to look at as long as we could.

*SoloShow* is an easy piece to dissect and explain in terms of feminist art, and it's a history that Hassabi is well aware of and, to some extent, channeling. But the work moves beyond such cut-and-dried definitions, providing glimpses into "an ineluctable mystery about the self," as Jessica Jackson Hutchins, another TBA artist, described the work that most moves her.

"I cannot pretend that I'm alive," Hassabi said later in the night, after her performance, a glass of wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Choreographic steps can make me dance yesterday, and not stay in the moment."

Theater is being in the moment. (As LeCompte put it, "Theater's like life: Why can't I get some perfection here!?" ) It's also pretending to be in that moment, and commenting on that paradox. A lot of contemporary performers are playing this game in overt fashion. But it's an old game, and thus it didn't seem so far-fetched that some old regulars (Shakespeare, Beckett) were represented too—the Bard via the warped lens of Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Beckett straight up, courtesy of several tour de force monologues by Conor Lovett of the Gare St. Lazare Players Ireland.



Left: Artist Rob Halverson, TBA:10 artist Storm Tharp, PNCA's MFA Chair and artist Arnold Kemp. Right: Curator Bob Nickas. (Photos: Wayne Bund)

And what performance festival these days can avoid that other canonical artist, Merce Cunningham? His company, now on its farewell tour, won't long survive its creator, who died last year. We can only hope his dances fare better: If they do, one big reason will be Charles Atlas, whose film collaborations with Cunningham put most current dance on camera to shame. At TBA, Atlas presented "With Merce," a collection of recordings culled from his many years spent following Cunningham: snippets of site-specific performances; fuzzy camcorder footage taken by Cunningham; even a silly little dance to house music when it seemed the choreographer could barely stand, let alone move like that.

"He never wound down," Atlas said. "He was still going two weeks before he passed away." And his ideas are going still. As Hassabi noted, talking about staying in the moment, "It's Merce Cunningham's philosophy. That little bit more is what keeps it breathing."