

### Wood's Indefatigable Women

**Ellis Wood Dance**  
**Dance Place**  
**Washington, DC**  
**Saturday, June 25, 2005**

**by Lisa Traiger**  
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Ellis Wood's dances unspool like enigmatic short stories—the gothic horror tales of Shirley Jackson, for example, or the proto-feminist treatise of Tillie Olsen come to mind. While Wood's works are narrative-less and thankfully eschew spoken word, she still infuses a great deal of dramatic action and relational discord into her pieces, primarily through the active participation and expression of her six indomitable dancers. What the works ultimately mean and the choreographer intended, though, well that's another story.

New Yorker Wood, who directs her consciously all-female Ellis Wood Dance, carries within her a modern dance provenance linking her back to one of our greatest feminine and feminist American dance icons, Martha Graham. Wood's parents, Marni and David Wood, were Graham dancers in the 1960s, who together later went on to found the dance department at University of California Berkeley, where Wood was trained.

But Wood's dancers are by no means Grahassettes, less distinct copies of the original. They're real women: sensual, sexy, provocative, tough as nails, fearless. They relish the physical—Wood (a one-time gymnast) pushes her dancers hard to some technical boundaries—and in a work like the 10-minute program opener "Lila Goes Fast" the women get caught up in the sheer abandon of whipping kicks, snapping heads, full-throttled catches, falls and off-kilter balances. As an opener, "Lila Goes Fast" serves as a quick tutorial into Wood's sensibility: her women are strong, good-looking and assertive—like modern-day sorceresses who won't take no for an answer. In earlier centuries, no doubt, they would have been burned at the stake for heresy.

A Lord of the Flies scenario influences Pignut, a new work that explores the darker side of human nature. These five women are rawly aggressive in their quest to rule the roost, in this case a pile of nuts. They tremble uncontrollably, trying to grasp a hold of the most nuts. Atavistic, at times nearly orgiastic, beneath Jessica Marchant's shadowy lighting, the women are mesmerizingly fierce, their faces as dramatically active as their bodies are physical. Grimaces, sneers, gasps and silent groans punctuate this seething cauldron of bodies all bent on capturing the most, winning, overcoming their co-competitors. It's a grueling study, approached with breathless abandon.

Of Wood's earlier group works, "Timeless Red" attracted attention for its striking visual imagery. Wood, visibly pregnant and clad in brilliant red sequins and a full-length ruby skirt, a feathered plume decorating her backside, performs as a demoness on a high black platform, while a dancer downstage in red tulle serenely practices yoga poses and headstands. Between these two dichotomies, a trio of women resist and acquiesce to Wood's puppet-mistress, her arms a swirl, her index finger dramatically beckoning, her face a mobile mask of simmering rage and control. The trio, semi-robotic, favors simple gestural repetition in this intriguing yet enigmatic study of power and submission.

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Marchant's innovative lighting became an integral part of "Island Solutions," originally choreographed as a site-specific work in Dresden, Germany's Palucca Schule earlier this year. At Dance Place, a pair of women begin in complete darkness on bare risers in the audience. Lit by flashlights and a portable hand-held stage lamp, they writhe and undulate, eyes semi-closed as if awash in a meditative trance. As they make their way to the stage other dancers fill the barren cinderblock space. One massive group (Dance Place students) oozes from the wings belly-crawling like part of some preternatural Dawn of the Dead horror flick. Darkly atmospheric, filled with discordant body images—angular limbs, spastic trembles, oozing ripples of bare-midriiffs, and dark-eyed, deeply meaningful looks—the work remains enigmatic, a cipher. And that's true for much of Ms. Wood's output; her choreographic expertise lends to clearly purposeful stage pictures, but reading them is often an exercise in futility. With a vivid imagination and a writerly perspective on choreography, much happens on Wood's stage; but it's near-impossible to know what it all means. For the moment, the big picture is beyond reach for viewers, if not for Woods.

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