

# the DANCE i n s i d e r

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Flash Review 2, 11-24: Hurricane Ellis  
Wood Storms Manhattan

By Maura Nguyen Donohue  
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NEW YORK -- Ellis Wood is a tempest. Her recent premiere, "Hurricane Flora," seen this past weekend at Dance Theater Workshop, where I am a member of the board, pounds like a furious gale. Nine women toss themselves through the theater with thrilling virtuosity and a seething sensuality, shifting quickly from wounded waif to raging banshee. Wood's choreography is both rant and rapture, moving in a moment from exposed to authoritative.

"Hurricane Flora" is performed in two rousing sections, "Air" and "Earth." "Air" begins with eight dancers, Julie Alexander, Lauren Beale, Claire Benton, Leslie Johnson, Samantha Lazzaro, Jennifer Philips, Gayla Marie Stiles and Kristine Willis, whispering and gasping in the dark. I have to admit that the sight of a large group of women dressed in variations on the same costume causes me to panic. It just looks too much like way too many unfortunate college dance works. (Granted any project titled "Mandance" still ranks higher on my cringe-o-meter than my fear of all-collegiate ensembles.) Of course, Wood surpasses these initial superficial trappings with demanding choreography and a company of determined dancers. And in view of today's dance making economy, not to mention the choreographer's additional duties as a new mom, it is a pretty impressive feat that she can manage and maintain such a large group.

Johnson leads the group, capturing Wood's style of awkward gestures, rapid-fire direction and balance changes and raw-ness with complete confidence. She balances upon her left knee as she develops her right leg up and away from her torso before falling back like the gently drifting leaves projected on the back screen. Later in the work as she inaudibly pleads in frantic, manic twitches the feeling is so painful and lonely, like those dreams in which your best friend betrays you, I find myself emotionally overpowered and openly weeping. It came suddenly in the moment after I dropped my critical examination of the overall composition and zoomed in on Johnson. Wood shifts skillfully here, taking us

from an active group sequence into a kind of choreographic zoom shot of one woman's anguish.

"Earth" begins with six dancers, each holding a large platter covered in flowers. Daniel Bernard Roumain, who has been accompanying his own recorded compositions with live violin, shifts into an Arabian scale. Coupled with the women's slowly opening legs the second section slowly wafts over you like an exotic perfume. Philips and Benton are held and tossed between the others. They are alternately dangled over the flowerbeds, trampled and caressed. The dance reaches a feverish pitch in a sumptuous bout of anarchy as the dancers finally let the flowers fly. They throw them at one another and in a whirlwind storm spew them out into the audience. Then in a flash of light and quiet, as in the aftermath of a tornado, the dance ends.

Wood pushes her dancers to emotionally charged places. Her familiar vocabulary of tossed back heads and reaching arms perfectly embodies the uneasy terrain between release and recklessness. Her exhaustive choreography, filled with pointed feet, legs kicked high and falling bodies demands athleticism and great technical skill. She's working in a clear arena of dance that sometimes gets tinged by the performers with a little too much jazziness. But those who get what she's getting at can capture the sexuality and forcefulness in her work without the cliché. Beale in particular stands out in the ensemble.

The program also included "Stella," a gorgeous solo for Wood, and an older group work, "Timeless Red." In "Stella" Wood ripples through incarnations of playfulness with the same audacity I remember from when I saw her first solo in DTW's "Fresh Tracks" almost 10 years ago, but with a more seasoned assuredness. I decide during this luscious solo that she's my favorite dancer in the world to watch. Okay, it's usually Desmond Richardson, but every couple years I catch up with Wood again and find myself floored. Seeing the progression from the older "Timeless Red" to the new "Hurricane Flora" I see her strengthening skill as a choreographer and would expect, would insist even, that her work reaches wider audiences in the coming years but I still find her juiciest dances are served up solo.

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