

Chutzpah! 2013: Lesley Telford's Brittle Failure

Coming hot on the heels of [PuSh](#), any other performing arts festival in the city would, even under the best of circumstances, be a challenge for my energy and attention. Fortunately, [Chutzpah!](#), Vancouver's International Showcase of Jewish Performing Arts, always finds my sweet spot with its abundant programming of cutting-edge contemporary dance (Artistic Director Mary-Louise Albert is herself a former dancer and dance instructor). What's more, this year's three dance offerings have been bundled into a very attractively priced ticket package. Who could resist?

Last night the Norman and Annette Rothstein Theatre featured the return of Vancouver-born choreographer Lesley Telford, who is presenting a new work called *Brittle Failure*. A collaboration with Japanese scenographer Yoko Seyama, the piece opens with hundreds of tiny white paper houses lined up in neat rows on the stage. In terms of size, scale, and uniformity, one is reminded of architectural models for planned communities or, worse, a concentration camp. Dancer Clyde Emmanuel Archer emerges from the wings and picks up one of the paper houses, placing it gently in the crook of his elbow, behind his knee, in the small of his back, all the while slowly moving (sometimes standing up, sometimes along the floor) clockwise around Seyama's fragile installation. He is soon joined by fellow dancers Iratxe Ansa and Miguel Oliviera, who begin an increasingly energetic duet upstage left, one that constantly threatens to spill over and upset the tidy rows of houses.

Indeed, the couple's movements seem deliberately counterpointed to Archer's as soloist: where he moves slowly and deliberately, respecting the architectural integrity of one model house at a time (and later using spoken word to reflect on his own childhood home), they move more quickly and cavalierly, at one point piling up dozens of houses in each other's arms, an image that succinctly encapsulates our natural acquisitiveness--whether for real estate or for memories. There are several other stunning visual effects created throughout the piece, as when a wash of moving lights cinematically animates the rows of houses, or when, in a *coup-de-théâtre*, the mat upon which the houses have been neatly aligned is pulled up by two wires, causing the houses to tumble into each other, creating an instant shantytown that is very quickly swept away.

As for the dancing, I was most taken by the two duets--between Ansa and Archer, and then between Ansa and Oliviera--that conclude the piece. The first is by far the more physical, the strength of one partner's fragile hold tested by the counter-weight of the other's oppositely straining body, Ansa and Archer enacting their own "brittle failure," which as the program notes remind us "is a technical term used to define the conditions under which solid materials fracture under pressure." Then, in the final duet between Ansa and Oliviera, Telford seems to be asking under what conditions might those broken pieces be put back together, a final origami abode placed gingerly between one foot of each of the dancers as they slowly pivot around it and also raise it delicately aloft, careful now not to crush what real or imagined space binds them together: "safe as houses."

Brittle Failure shares a program with a remix of work by local hip-hop favourites [605 Collective](#), as well

as a moving duet by Israeli choreographer Itzik Galili, danced by Oliviera and Telford herself. There is one more performance tonight at 7 pm.

P.