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In 'Ruth,' choreographer Lionel Popkin engagingly dismantles St. Denis's Orientalism

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Los Angeles-based choreographer Lionel Popkin premiered his latest work, "Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore," Saturday at Dance Place. "Ruth" proved inordinately engaging. It was sprinkled with jewels of movement sequences, striking visuals and thought-provoking moments. At the same time, it ho-hummed in spots like an interesting public speaker going on a bit too long.

Popkin's works frequently explore his Indian heritage. (The Hindu elephant god Ganesha figured in his 2009 "There is an Elephant in the Room," for instance.) "Ruth" focuses on the insensitive way that modern dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis created her Orientalist works.

Popkin delved into St. Denis's journals, photos, programs, sketches, costumes and notes, and "Ruth" is fueled by annoyance at what he found. There wasn't much truly Eastern about the dances. They were stereotyped and hyped and created with a nose for what sells, albeit artfully. Popkin disliked her cavalier attitude to Indian culture, so in "Ruth" he deconstructed these Orientalist dances' false magic.

Dancers Popkin, Emily Beattie and Carolyn Hall shattered St. Denis's noble bearing by moving in a relaxed manner. They crossed the border between performer and viewer using eye contact with audience members. To break the bubble of magic that envelopes a stage and separates it from the audience, Popkin periodically stepped forward and spoke to the audience in the casual manner of two neighbors chatting over a fence. These chats effectively broke up the no-intermission work into several, shorter parts.

Popkin has a flair for originality that periodically has you realizing that you are smiling to yourself in the dark. In one instance, three prone figures rolled like pool balls that scatter, knock into each other and slowly cruise to a stop. It was magical. He tossed yards of fabric (signifying St. Denis's costumes) into the air, enlivening the space above the dancers' heads.

All in all, the segments could have used some editing so that you didn't feel like Popkin was determined to get out everything he wanted to say without being interrupted. Still, "Ruth" kept your interest, even if at times you weren't sure why.

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