

## Culture Club

# You Got To Move It

Lionel Popkin at Alverno, Danceworks' "Intersect." BY PAUL KOSIDOWSKI 11/18/2013



The clothes make the dance in Lionel Popkin's [Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore](#), which Alverno Presents brought to the Pitman Theatre last Saturday. That's not to say there aren't a lot of other ideas floating around. The "Ruth" of the title is Ruth St. Denis, who eventually became half of The Denishawn Company and School, which represented one of the earliest American impulses to break "serious" dance away from the traditions of ballet. As such, the group embraced other international dance forms and styles, taught them and performed them.

As an American dancer of mixed Indian and Jewish heritage, Popkin is interested in the idea St. Denis "trying on" the trappings of Indian costume and movement. St. Denis became known for her dances "imported" from other cultures. And Popkin is particularly fascinated with how St. Denis packaged and sold instruction kits (called "Dance in a Box") to those who wanted to learn her "oriental" dances at home.

It's understandable if this seems like theater as dry, doctoral dissertation (I confess I had that thought after reading the description of the program). But *RTLHA* it's not a bit didactic or pedantic. Partly because Popkin is an engaging and sweet-natured lecturer—he tells stories, shares some history, and even thanks his mom for donating some of the saris that are part of the stage design. He doesn't condemn St. Denis for "stealing" the authentic dances of a different tradition. But he does want us to wonder what it means to be "authentic."

So *RDLHA* is rife with gentle tensions between things and descriptions of things. There is Ruth St. Denis herself—represented in ghostly images of her performing in one of her most famous dances, "Incense." And the strange history of her name, which she changed several times during her career. There are the texts of St. Denis's "kits"—movement-by-movement

directions—projected at the back of the stage. And there is the movement itself, which does and doesn't echo the descriptions.

And there are the clothes and fabrics—trunkfuls that are emptied onto the stage, thrown in the air, danced through and over, tried on, taken off and even tossed around by a leaf blower. This, of course, is the central question of the dance—what happens when we “try on” the trappings of another culture. Both the choreography and the music capture that polarity. The captivating and distinctive original music by accordionist Guy Kluvasek—played live by Kluvasek and violinist Todd Reynolds—floats in a kind of musical buffer zone: Indian ragas, gypsy-ish dance tunes, continental tango figures are all mixed in ways that no one style becomes prominent.

And Popkin's choreography, set on himself, Emily Beattie and Carolyn Hall, explores that tension while offering the visceral charge one gets from fresh and dynamic movement. Popkin does a solo in which he is wrapped in a sari, then sloughs it off with jerky, antic gyrations. Hall does a swooping solo of leaps and twirls that is said to be choreographed by the skirt she wore, which she picked up for seven dollars at a thrift shop. Some of the gestural vocabulary is clearly drawn from traditional Indian dance, but it's refracted through both St. Denis's and Popkin's sensibility.

Watching from the main floor of the Pitman Theatre, I wished I could look down on the stage, and see the abstractions created by the scattered pools of patterned silk and decorative skeins of rope. But I was glad to see the dancers from this angle, who spend a lot of time on the floor.

Rolling on the floor, even. Early on, the trio of dancers lie flat on the floor with their bare feet facing us, and they roll like kids tumbling down a grassy hill—colliding, over-and-under—a little horizontal *pas de trois* (representing the clash of cultures in St. Denis's work?). In the piece's climax, a marvelously energized trio, the three move across the stage on their bottoms in a streamlined and post-modernized vision of yogic “flying.”

A mystical note to end the piece, but it's magnified still more by the last idea, delivered as the lights dimmed. “The thing about talking to dead people, is that sometimes they talk back.”

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