the village VOICE

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Dance

By Deborah Jowitt

Sara Pearson/Patrik Widrig and Company
A History of Silence
At P.S. 122
May 20 through 23

Sanghi Wagner
Solos and Group Dance
At P.S. 122
June 10 through 13

I saw Sara Pearson's *A History of Silence* at an invitational showing for a host of people who'd missed the official P.S. 122 performances weeks earlier. All that was lacking was Tony Giovannetti's lighting. The crowd was a warm, happy one, predisposed to like the work; however, I can imagine the paying audience also approving it. *A History of Silence* isn't a perfect work, but it contains some of the finest—and certainly some of the funniest—episodes of dance drama that I've seen all season.

The piece is structured as a series of short scenes. Some are built out of dancing, others out of dialogue, and all, it seems to me, have to do with missed connections or feelings repressed to the bursting point. The intermittent eclectic music—Turkish, Afghan, and Persian songs as well as Fats Waller and Gounod—links domestic dilemmas with world problems (but not very convincingly; a commissioned score would be an asset). When Pearson and Patrik Widrig dance together, their bodies just graze one another in passing; each molds to the other's outline, but with inches between them. Their duet is the opposite of one between Lisa Race and Gerardo Delgado, who slide their bodies over each other with such fumbly fervor that I imagine their skins being worn away.

One of Pearson's partners is imaginary. She begins reaching out as if to tweak invisible nipples: "Do you like this? Does this feel good? How about this?" The gestures that accompany the repeated questions become weirder, fiercer, sometimes more abstract. Religious conventions are the opponent when Pearson and Andrea Kleine stand shoulder to shoulder through the saccharine Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria." Kleine is silently "singing," making the most awful faces. Pearson is at first embarrassed by the unseemly (and hilarious) display, rolls her eyes to see if this is what's supposed to happen, then decides to copy, as best she can, the facial gymnastics.

In one dialogue scene, Philip Kain III and Nathan Whiting sit on the floor and hold a low-key, elliptical conversation whose topic might be terminal illness, with every sentence a variant of "She told Sam, but she didn't tell Mary." There are several wonderful scenes for these two men. In the most telling, Kain sits in Whiting's arms and asks Whiting to drop him suddenly. It's never right. Kain keeps scolding Whiting for not "being in the moment," for not *feeling* this right. To all Kain's wonderfully funny, wonderfully acted, elaborate analyses of what art—as embodied by his being dumped on the floor—is supposed to be, Whiting offers not a single word of dissent or justification. This, of course, leads to, "You never talk to me." If the two weren't so dissimilar, you'd think Akbar and Jeff.

Kain is even more terrific in a scene that has us almost helpless with laughter. He's an actor in a scene with Jaime Ortega. This is—or should be—a very simple exchange: "Hello." "Hello." "How are you?" "I'm okay." "Nice place you've got here." And so on. But Kain enters terminally nervous and garbles *all* the lines. Ortega, suave and patient, corrects him, switches roles to clarify things. It's hopeless. Kain—twitching, apologizing, getting it wrong in impossible new ways, shrinking with embarrassment, exhausting himself—is finally unable to continue. He hasn't even understood the sequence, and now his partner wants him to think about the feelings behind the words. Even as you're laughing and marveling at Kain's skill, you understand how terrifying this is.

In the end, everyone (the cast includes Husa Adams) stands while Pearson and Widrig thread a duet between them as if the others were trees and they were lost in a forest. It's an impressive image, but in general the dancing seems less thought out than the dialogue and the gestural elements. Widrig has an interesting solo in which he perpetually strives for balance and is knocked askew. Yet often Pearson relies on loose tantrummy outbursts of movement, without the fine and specific colors of those scenes that hang so boldly over the crevice separating comedy from tragedy.