

## *Death Go-lightly*

### **Pearson/Widrig Look Into the "HereAfter" at the Joyce**

By Albert Lee

Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig's "HereAfter," which premiered at the Joyce Theater Wednesday, is a two-part, evening-length piece about death, and much of it is light-hearted. It puts you in a wonderful mood.

Neither a somber parade of melancholia nor an extended meditation on loss, "HereAfter" is largely unstitched sequences of spoken and danced quips about company members' brushes with death. They march out and line up and tell us about the last time they saw X, what was said at Y's grave, what Z probably misses most in the afterlife.

There's a sense of humor in Widrig and Pearson's choreography--falling down being the punch-line--that's nearly camp. Imagine a slatternly Paul Taylor--staccato bursts of leaping, with one leg cocked and arms sweeping the air, springing up and falling to the floor. In the opening of the evening's second half, dancers dash into place, raise an arm, collapse, roll over, and then do it again. Set largely to a rollicking, vaudevillian score by Robert Eén (and performed live by Eén, Carter Burwell, Steve Elson and Hearn Gadbois), "HereAfter" is no elegy.

But it is not a celebration of life either. When the dancers leap, they look down or face away, and convey thoughtfulness rather than extroverted, Taylor-ian energy.

What makes the individual movements so interesting is the diversity of the cast. The company of 12, dressed simply in loose, colorful slacks and tops, contains some refreshingly unconventional body types -- tall and short, old and young, svelte and stocky. Its members wrote their own anecdotes, which make the stories that much more interesting, and the expressiveness of their faces match that of their bodies.

The work is interspersed with a few slide show and video sequences of the dancers (shot by Widrig), set to old-timey, scratchy records.

Widrig and Pearson's one foray into grave image-crafting seems less effective. Rodrigo Esteva recalls visiting his dying grandmother in Mexico while members of the company scoop up and pour water among six or so large tin basins. This mise-en-scene is followed by a (somewhat mawkish) violin solo, performed onstage by Liz Claire, and the smashing of a large ice block with a sledgehammer. One would prefer to avoid the inevitable metaphorical inquiry: If water is life, is water, frozen and shattered, death?

Sara Pearson's solo, on the other hand, is rare and magical in its economy. Pearson remembers how a death she anticipated is delayed, forcing her to repeatedly postpone a planned trip to Europe. Just as she decides she must get on with her life, the death comes at last. Merely by lifting her heels, hopping, and waving her arms, she conveys the myriad, conflicted feelings of loss--sorrow, anger, relief, despair, weariness.

Then she lifts her arms and spins, looking like a dervish in pain, or in ecstasy.

Performing with Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig in "HereAfter" are Esteva, Claire, Philip Kain III, Mirah Moriarty, Nicki Benevento, Mark Bruak, Jay Elz, Katherine Fisher, Joseph Palmer, and Justine Rendal. The lighting was designed by Tony Giovannetti and the costumes were by Naoko Nagata. The performance will be repeated on January 26 and 27.