

Dancing with Eva Yaa Asantewaa: Exclusive Reviews

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PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER

92 on 42: The 92nd St Y Harkness Dance Project at The Duke on 42nd Street

If you don't mind sitting still in a cold theater for 70 minutes, by all means go see *Thaw*. You'll be well rewarded by this energetic new work by Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig. From its creators' accounts, *Thaw* was inspired by everything from the winterscape of Lake Superior's north shore to the deep chill that settled around people of conscience after last year's disastrous election.

We hear the wind's low whoosh and whirr, a crunching of boots in icy snow. Pearson, dressed in white parka and pants, trudges across the space, dragging a small box of ice shards. A tidy row of thick, flat squares of ice separates the performance space from the audience. Pearson approaches the first ice tile and suddenly slams her fuzzy boot down onto it, shattering it into jagged chunks. Underlying water slops over the edge of its frame, forming a little pool. Pearson moves on, repeating her action with each of several others along the line.

Pearson's choice of Duke Ellington's "In A Sentimental Mood" adds a nostalgic overlay to historical film footage of people breaking ice on a body of water by using a hand or buzz saw, an industrial contraption, or long, two-pronged picks. In other ice-harvesting footage, oblong blocks are loaded onto a conveyor belt and lofted into a factory, looking—it's startling to realize—like animals going to slaughter in silence, one by one. We listen to the Ellington melody and look with fascination at these mundane yet remote activities, perhaps thinking about the wartime period in which this poignant music held sway, wondering what Pearson and Widrig were thinking and how, in specific terms, they might link that era to our own. While *Thaw* reveals nothing literal, it suggests, most of all, the choreographers' desire to shatter surfaces and release the vital reality trapped within.

Thaw moves into a new phase as white-clad dancers collapse into the space, scrabbling and scrambling over the floor. The soundscape takes us into a wilderness—water pouring and rushing, ice crinkling, cracking, big shards of it falling away from a larger mass—where the dancers' movements help us feel the energy of these natural events. The dancers use weight and momentum like skilled, efficient acrobats—nothing fancy, nothing gussied up. Tumbling onto their hands, they "walk" their feet along the theater's back wall or take the kind of running jump off the wall that my tabby cat enjoys. An environment, its flora, and its fauna exist within their dancing. Designer Barry Steele—whose work invokes the many colors of ice and water—lights them handsomely and creates not only a haunting sense of place but also a sense of the motion of time.

For one momentary magical flourish, two bowls set atop pedestals gush smoke-like vapors of liquid ice. During the post-performance Q&A, Pearson revealed how much theatrical bric-a-brac the troupe first dreamed up then wisely edited out. This tiny bit was enough. *Thaw's* many endearing surprises, and the solid work of its five dancers—longtime partners Pearson and Widrig plus Lindsay Gilmour, Tzveta Kassabova, and Matthew Rogers—carry enough everyday magic for several productions.