

O.K., Great, Just Hold That Pose and Smile

By ERIKA KINETZ

LOIS GREENFIELD has spent about three decades photographing dance, and her best pictures are touched with the impossible. Otherwise reasonable-looking folks balance on the tops of their heads. People seem to perch in the palms of one another's hands. And none of them appear to notice the bodily harm they are surely about to suffer.

"I'm always looking for something that is going to confound the viewer," she said. "It's about creating a mystery." The moments she captures may seem impossible, but she insists that not one photograph has ever been digitally manipulated. That's not to say her method is always the same, though. She is a restless experimenter, and her latest results will be on view Tuesday through Sunday in "Held," a collaboration with the Australian Dance Theater receiving its New York premiere at the Joyce Theater.

For about half of the hourlong performance, Ms. Greenfield is onstage taking pictures. As she records images with her camera, they are projected, seconds later, onto two 9-by-9-foot screens onstage. "I have no safety net," she said. "This dance is happening faster than any dance I've seen in my life. It's coming at me from all sides, in all directions. It's pretty nerve-racking." As new as "Held" is, it is also in some respects a return to Ms. Greenfield's roots. "This is taking me back to the beginning, where I'm shooting live action," she said. From the 1970's to the early 90's, she photographed dance performances for The Village Voice, but, she said, she quickly tired of "documenting someone else's art form." In 1982, she began taking photographs of two young dancers, David Parsons and Daniel Ezralow, improvising in her studio. Gradually, she began to assert more control over the images she created, altering movement to suit her compositional needs. (In February she spent an evening taking photographs of the choreographer Molly Rabinowitz and her dancers, myself included.)

"Held" began not with choreography but with a photo shoot. "The whole thing is backwards," Ms. Greenfield said. In November 2003, she was invited by Australian Dance Theater to go to Adelaide to photograph its dancers as the basis for a new piece. "I started working with them the way I

work with anyone, which is to say, ‘Show me what you do,’” she said. “Then I change it, reorient it, extrapolate it, extend it.” Here, the process went further: “The choreography was retrofitted to the pictures I took,” she said.

Garry Stewart, the company’s artistic director, quickly realized that the most interesting pictures featured dancers suspended in midflight. “I had to create choreography embedded with a multitude of photogenic moments,” he said.

“To begin with, I overcompensated and made it too obviously a jumping exercise, and I had to reappraise the choreography and make it more seamless.”

The dancers, too, strive to be photogenic. “When you jump in the air, you expect a flash, and you hang and wait for it,” said Ross McCormack, a dancer in the troupe. “You’re dancing with her. Really, it’s a duet.”

The photographs in “Held” represent human action in increments of 1/2,000th of a second. “The viewer is seeing the event and a solid version of a split second almost like a microscope,” Ms. Greenfield said. “It reveals a slice of time the naked eye can’t see.”

It’s as if her camera were peeling back the surface continuity of time to reveal the heroic stuff of milliseconds. In her pictures, the dancers are transformed into huge avenging angels, demons, strange gods and monsters.

“You see yourself and go: ‘Far out! Do I look like that? I didn’t think I looked like that,’” Mr. McCormack said. “To see the amazing positions we get into, that really is quite inspiring.”

Ms. Greenfield takes about 350 photographs during each performance of “Held.” At their best, the pictures capture the dynamics of movement itself: the pull of gravity against weightlessness, balance against imbalance, effort against release. Like the dance, the images vary from night to night. “It’s such wild energy that most of them are not repeatable moments,” she said. Unlike the dance, however, the pictures have a shot at posterity. They are all digitally saved, and Ms. Greenfield said she hopes eventually to gather them in a book.

Ms. Greenfield and Mr. Stewart say that “Held” is meant to be a meditation on what and how we see. In one section, Ms. Greenfield’s slow-motion video of dancers rising and falling like angels is projected on the screens.

There are Muybridge-like motion studies, and parts performed in intermittent light, which allow the audience to see only fragments of the action. The piece ends with a slide show of steely perfection, which includes some of the carefully made images from the original studio photo shoot. Dance, of course, is more than visual. It is a physical art, with a kinetic logic that unfurls through time, not in sharp isolated bursts of light. Whether Ms.

Greenfield's images overpower Mr. Stewart's dance or reveal its depths, and whether they rip viewers out of the experience of witnessing live performance or intensify their perception of it are open questions. Answers will be available at the Joyce this week.

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