

Light as a Feather

"Angels of Swedenborg"

Ping Chong and the Great Jones Repertory

Ellen Stewart Theater at LaMama New York, NY

November 10, 2011

By Martha Sherman

LaMama's 50th anniversary season opened in a flurry of wings - and 600 pounds of feathers. Ping Chong's revival of the 1985 production "Angels of Swedenborg" has been updated to include references to iPods and flat screens, but Emanuel Swedenborg's underlying exploration of angels above and below resonates in any era. To the entering audience, a downstage electronic ticker shared a repeating loop of news from Swedenborg, an 18th Century scientist and mystic, "The Lord has graciously opened the sight of my spirit. He has raised me into heaven and lowered me into hell, and has shown me visually what each is like." Ping Chong's visually rich dance theater used Swedenborg's images to honor LaMama's own guiding spirit. He turned the space named for her -- the Ellen Stewart Theater -- into a shimmering, billowing swirl of white, as angels danced among us



Copyright © 2011 by Martha Sherman. Much of the power of this piece came from the singularity and lushness of the luminous visual images. The costumes and video projections were whites, silvers, and grays, and the central stage design was a large fenced corral of feathers, dappled with globes of pale colored light. Angels romped, fought, danced, and paraded in this downy heaven. It was counter-balanced by a small modern office at the edge of the stage where the ticker ran continuous repetitive, strange headlines, the office laminated in white and complete with computer and phone. The characters were fully covered in neutral masks and white wigs, wearing long pale grey costumes and, of course, the requisite wings.

A large screen provided a backdrop to both sides of the set; the projections moved from a starry universe whizzing past, as if out of a Steven Spielberg film, to white lacelike patterns and beams of light. If the soundtrack (designed by Brian Hallas) had a color, it was versions of white, too – children's voices, running water, angelic bells, soft rivers of sound in slow waves of rhythm.

The angels all moved elegantly despite their voluminous costumes. Their gloved hands rose up and out, fluttering softly in shared patterns, as they moved through scenes of innocence, connection, conflict and punishment often in simple danced horizontal lines through the feathers. Each had solo moments and partners, and the group eventually expanded to eight dancers, moving in a celestial quadrille or graceful parade.



Just as the stage was a world in two parts (feathers and office, heaven and earth,) the dance was also played in two – the angelic host cavorting in heaven, while the sleeping/dreaming Swedenborg (Henning Heglund) was in duet with a spirit (Sara Galassini) at his desk. They were a gentle passive pair, moving in parallel with their upper bodies. Galassini laid her arm and head along the relaxed line of Heglund's shoulder as he slept and dreamt of what was happening on the feathered stage behind. In a later scene, Heglund took more control in a battle of wills with the spirit that paralleled an angels' duel in the feather corral.

Two powerful Archangels (George Drance and Charlotte Brathwaite) energized the most dramatic scenes, pointing and pushing the frailer angels. In an initiation, Drance gathered an angel-in-training into his arms, both embracing and locking, then bestowed wings on the acolyte. Later, after an angel duel, the losing angel's wings were clipped off, and the community collectively shunned the banned one (this scene's soft-edged aggressiveness also shocked because it was lit in red.) The second Archangel, Brathwaite, broke the universal pattern of white, wearing a richly colored and layered brocade robe, high headdress, and lizard-like mask. Brathwaite moved behind the fence, and snickered through a patter of dialogue to tempt the skitterish angels who were both drawn and repelled by her temptations. A devilish figure, we were reminded of the Archangel who fell.

Framed by two sunrises in the background, both the opening and closing scenes also made room for a playful, bear-like "Beastie" (Alison Plomondon) who frolicked in the feathers as a child. At the dance's close, she sat with Heglund and the angels contemplating the rising sun, which became a smiling baby, a nod to Swedenborg's deeply religious mysticism. The strange creativity of the man who encountered a world of angels was well served by Ping Chong's magic. For the less religiously-inclined, the sweep of imagination still offered a rebirth.

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Top: Maura Donohue in "Angels of Swedenborg"
Bottom: Sara Galassini and Henning Heglund in "Angels of Swedenborg"