

■ DANCE

Urban Ecologies

Williamsburg choreographer leads migration toward environmental awareness

BY LORI ORTIZ

The environment as it relates to living organisms" is the dictionary.com definition of ecology. Jennifer Monson and Bird Brain, iLand's "Flight of Mind" at Dance Theater Workshop on September 19 was an urban ecology. Based in Williamsburg, Monson found the East River piers a fertile ground for both rehearsal and observation. In Williamsburg one can see birds, feel close to nature, and be keenly aware of its fragile coexistence with the man-made.

Monson has been following the migratory paths of ospreys, pigeons, and other birds and animals since 2000. The choreographer migrated to East Village community gardens and locales from Maine to Mexico to observe and create.

The DTW building was both site and part of the subject of the performance. In a mapped "building migration," young dancers hopped on the terrace, running in groups or in tenuous arabesque solos. Monson and pros tumbled on the sidewalk. The audience flocked to the basement, and enter the stage area through a forest of potted reeds. Sitting around the perimeter of the stage on overturned buckets, or frontally, in the normal stadium seating, the audience was already keenly aware of the environment of the building; having recapitulated the choreographers migration and embarked on a creative exploration of its own.

In Joe Levasseur's apt design, the house and stage were brightly lit for the



Several species of invasive plants serve as décor for Jennifer Monson's "Flight of Mind."

start of Monson, Alex Escalante, Katy Pyle, and Eleanor Hulihan's riveting improvisation-based movement. David Kean's laptop score clinched the symbiosis with sampled building sounds and guitar; by vocalizing and manipulating props, the performers expanded the soundscape. On the man-made end of the continuum, a polyethylene bag of Styrofoam blocks was emptied and crushed—and surprisingly musical. In woven vests and natural colored clothes the dancers hopped, dragged a foot, rolled on the floor, collided, pressed together for warmth or shivered in unison.

The bucket seats were artifacts of city life; the same ones were overturned by

buskers for drums. Great numbers of them in the stage area served as containers for several species of invasive plants—decor by Bob Braine with Leslie Reed. Hulihan knelt over a pot of reeds and seemed stuck there.

The push/pull permeability of organism and environment was revealed in the dancing. They lunged, swinging buckets of reeds, creating a momentum across the stage. Weight, energy, and impetus were palpably transferred from dancer to bucket. Monson and Hulihan lay under a sheet of the plywood and it rippled with excitement from their convulsive, quasi-sexual motion. Escalante hung on a rolling garment rack with a container of

reeds that had been hung there too. With this kind of proactive playfulness, the sights and sounds of the city were embraced in "Flight of Mind." The interdependence of our actions and our environment were keenly demonstrated.

The fun peaked when the four paired off in opposite colored follow spots and danced to an original punk rock beat with eco-lyrics, "Robert Moses drained the estuaries for shit that wasn't necessary." In another coup, they linked arms for a "Swan Lake" pas de quatre in tiny, netted bubble wrap tutus.

Dancers whipped whooshing thin four-foot by eight-foot plywood sheets, moving the air and detritus from the stands of broken reeds that littered the stage. The facsimile of a wetland environment naturally showed wear and tear from the gusting, brio, and tumult. In the last quarter, Hulihan quietly disappeared. Actually, she was injured by the wood, and she was missed.

In an after-panel of artists and conservationists called "Moving Ecologies," about the urban landscape, Michael Crewdson, co-author of "Wild New York" said birds are "very dirty, full of lice," especially in New York. The panel of ecologists appreciated the unsentimental look at "beautiful birds, not so beautiful surroundings and strange behavior" in Monson/Bird Brain's "Flight of Mind." The panelists agreed that art and science are felicitous partners, and can work together to affect first awareness and then change. In this way, Monson's piece is part of a new consciousness.