
Choreographer takes her bird dance outside

By Sid Smith
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Social relevance and dance are not automatically linked. Much of the art in the last 100 years or so has leaned on abstraction, not political commentary. But, as with any generality, there are exceptions, especially in the last two decades. And this weekend, a socially minded choreographer is in our midst, and to make her point about our treatment of the environment, she takes her dance where concert performances rarely venture: the outdoors. That alone makes Jennifer Monson and her Bird Brain Dance noteworthy. The small group that gathered Thursday, for instance, at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Randolph Street, endured gray skies and sharp cold. The elements didn't cooperate, but, then, that's the point: We can't control nature and shouldn't try. Also, unlike controlled indoor events, passersby became a part of the audience and, in a way, a part of the performance, halting their otherwise determined saunter to gape. This typically rarified art thrust itself back into the community.

All that said, Monson and her ensemble of three other dancers win more points for earnest intent than artistic achievement. The topic is fascinating, and Monson's way of going about it is fascinating too. "Ducks and Geese Migration" is precisely about its title, a 10-week dance tour that follows the northbound migration along the Mississippi River, beginning in Corpus Christi, Texas, and winding up in Canada. Along the way, the outdoor performances are invariably accompanied by indoor panel discussions on conservation and the environment.

The piece itself, though, is modest, lovely to watch and ultimately a bit dull. Monson and company don't resort to transparent, birdlike imitation, but rely on slow motion, martial art-like imagism, hypnotic hand gestures and quirky, spasmodic eruptions. On Thursday, they began by walking about the large lawn in Wrigley Square (an early event in this inaugural season for Millennium Park), and, after some dramatic interactions that evoked unnatural dangers, ended in a tightknit cluster. At times, they collapsed, while at others, they interacted with whispers of drama. But for all its facility in using its outside setting, "Migration" is not an especially seductive dance in structure, development or imagery. It's rudimentary and inoffensive, more memorable for its statement than its style. The small flock of pigeons pecking away before the performance, by the way, took flight at the work's onset. Natural fear or an avian pan?

Additional performances and discussions are set for 7 a.m. to noon and 3 to 8 p.m. Saturday in the Calumet Open Space Reserve. (Buses depart at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. Saturday from the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave., which is presenting the project.) Another round is scheduled for 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Lincoln Park, 2430 N. Cannon Drive. For more information: 312-397-4010.