

## **Brontë Country**

### **Rosanna Gamson/World Wide: Rosanna Gamson's Ravish**

**October 14, 2008**

**By ALLAN ULRICH**      © VoiceofDance.com 2008

This year, ODC Theater (the presenting wing of San Francisco's ODC Dance) has been in residence at Project Artaud, while its own digs are being renovated; last weekend, the organization wound up nine months of mini-festivals, which, under curator Rob Bailis' guiding hand, must be considered a solid success. Not everything appealed, to be sure, yet the thematic arrangement of the festivals, and the plan both to deliver something new to our cloistered community and to mine the best of that community, has generated some *outré* moments, but few boring ones. The final installment, *OFF BOOK: Stories That Move*, represented a collaboration with Litquake. So, it seemed logical to turn over the lion's share of the weekend to a dance work inspired (but not dominated) by the written word. That would be Rosanna Gamson's *Ravish*, a curiously moving and luxuriantly produced meditation on the Brontë clan. True, Martha Graham treated the subject in *Deaths and Entrances* back in the 1940s, but Gamson, a Los Angeles resident, who made her Bay Area debut on Friday (Oct. 10), attempts something less cosmic and more intimate. By and large, she succeeds in evoking a household, so far from the literary mainstream that it forces itself to remake the rules on artistic creation.

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In any case, history records that there were five Brontë sisters, only four of whom survived into maturity, and they are represented here, along with brother Branwell, at best a person in a fragile psychological state. It is hard to tell the extent to which Gamson drew on the historical record for her 55-minute opus or how much she has opted for speculation and metaphor. Certainly, Branwell's frequent spinouts, drops and rolls do not suggest mental health, and Michael Gomez's volatile performance in a shirt that seems to be crumbling from the dancer's body only fortifies the impression. Best not to think Heathcliff or Mr. Rochester. That way lies a literary fallacy, and Gamson refrains from assigning the women distinct characterizations.

What you notice first is the family's fragmentation. Two of the women hover on the periphery, whispering. Another dons pointe shoes and tries them out. Branwell exults in his instability. Not till half way through do these siblings join hands (in an unstable circle, need I add), and the moment seems like an epiphany. Later, all the women switch to pointe shoes; I guess the source of literary creation is mysterious and unfathomable, but you do get the idea that we carve our careers from what we experience in our environment.

The idea isn't profound, but Gamson's dancemaking skill is rich and varied. Her phrasing, extended and voluptuous, or short and pugnacious, never fails to support a mood. The dancers are a splendidly attuned lot. The women were Sarah Goodrich, Li-Ann Lim, Lilia Lopez and a fireball named Carin Noland, who corkscrewed across the space with startling abandon.

*Ravish* has been sumptuously mounted. Texts are projected on the rear wall, and Barnaby Levy has devised a series of ingenious projections for the floor. One of them shows us a dinner table, two place settings, two bowls of soup and two pair of hands consuming it. Bailis has compiled a deft sound score comprised of music that was popular during the Brontës' heyday, like Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata (to accompany the soupy visuals), Schumann's Piano Concerto and some lugubrious parlor songs. In a modern dance scene notable for neglecting the imperatives of theater, it's odd and refreshing to encounter in *Ravish* a work that's almost overproduced.