

Cell Mates, 51802 Charts Love On The Outside Looking In

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Dance theater remains a thriving genre in Bay Area performance. To call it a subgenre of one or the other just doesn't allow due respect for offerings by the likes of Jess Curtis, Joe Goode, inkBoat, Rebecca Salzer, and Deborah Slater. Erika Chong Shuch's ESP Project, the resident company at Intersection for the Arts, is among the leaders in this field. Playful and romantic, with an irresistible urge to investigate the darker regions of inner and outer space, Shuch's work partakes freely and idiosyncratically of all that the bare stage might offer in the way of strategy, including dramatic action, unconventional movement (often incorporating nonprofessional dancers), voice-over narration, taped interviews, singing, video installations, and puppetry – all of which went into the alternately eerie and euphoric poetry of 2006's *Orbit (Notes from the Edge of Forever)*.

Shuch's latest work moves still further away from dance-centered performance, using movement as only one element in (an almost subordinate) relation to others, especially text and song. But perhaps because of the especially personal nature of *51802*, which bares a real-life love story in veiled disguise to interrogate the mixed feelings and existential crises arising from a lover's incarceration, this latest piece sometimes feels weighed down by a too concrete need to voice some definitive explanation or conclusion.

Nonetheless, Shuch and her ensemble (Dwayne Calizo, Jennifer Chien, Tommy Shepherd, and Danny Wolohan) create some memorable moments, and the *mise-en-scène* conveys flashes of real inspiration. Moreover, there's a poetic and pertinent irony in the bitter symmetry offered by the central story, which can be said to begin and end on opposite sides of a wall. The first one divides the apartments of two urban strangers but not the music they create in their seemingly separate worlds, setting up a flirtation in sound that starts as a competitive call-and-response and ends in literal harmony, all before

any physical meeting. Composer Allen Willner's score and original, acoustic guitar-based songs – soulful, bluesy, and romantic – serve as a kind of reincarnated version of this elemental discourse as music becomes the primary medium for connection on a stage inhabited by otherwise lonely bodies, often captured (courtesy of the elegant lighting design, also by Willner) in isolated spots of soft, almost burnished light.

The second wall is, of course, that of the prison. Also literal and figurative at once, it intrudes into an intense love affair whose history is by now fraught with emotional dissonance and even psychological abuse. But love – albeit a more complex and ambivalent version – breaches this wall too, mediated by letters, memories, and imagination.

This imagery remains suggestive though underdeveloped (Shuch relates the beginning of the love affair in a few lines about midway through the 60-minute performance). For the most part, the story comes to us more obliquely, through the songs and fanciful scenes and characters deployed to plumb the depths of the isolation gripping both parties to the separation. In one memorable sequence, a man (Wolohan) stranded at the bottom of a well befriends a blind mouse to whom he confesses a childhood act of violence. In other sequences Shuch or Shepherd play stir-crazy shut-ins desperately coaxing a lover's ghost to haunt the room.

These scenes and others we understand to be inventions of the lover left behind on the outside, walled in by her involved and evolving connection to the incarcerated other. But if 51802 is about absence, its emphatic drive to fill theatrical space with a superfluity of words and dramatic gestures to that effect can end by pushing that absence just out of reach. Words, to a significant degree, have taken the place of movement here, as if furnishing their own jail cell that allows little space for the body.

When raised in song (as when Shuch softly sings the refrain, "I ain't wavin' babe – I'm drowning"), they can still seem liberating in their (physical) evocations. But even the more suggestive lines in Shuch's interspersed text can feel incomplete. A refrain is heard in both dialogue and song states: "There is no perfect good-bye"; this key piece

of wisdom sounds true enough. But as Shuch notes with a flowing sweep of the arms, good ones require one person to remain still while the other moves off in a rush of motion. This — a dancer's insight — sounds like the germ of a larger idea, the opening of some larger movement. But when it comes along, near the end of the 60-minute performance, there is little room or time for much more.

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