

She's A Rebel: With 51802, Choreographer Erika Shuch Looks In From The Outside At The Impact Of The California Prison System

Kimberly Chun | San Francisco Bay Guardian | Fall Arts Preview | September 2007

"See the way he walks down the street / Watch the way he shuffles his feet / My, he holds his head up high / When he goes walking by / He's my kind of guy-ai-ai-ai." The agony and the ecstasy of the Crystals echo through the humid second-floor rehearsal space at Intersection for the Arts, bouncing off the pine floors, streaming out the open window, and pinging off the scaffolding propped on Valencia, above the construction bustle and everyday hustle of the Mission District. The Gene Pitney song originally soared, with so much heart-pinching, giggle- and tear-inducing bittersweetness, from the diamond pipes of Darlene Love, at the time the chosen femme surrogate of Wall of Sound architect Phil Spector. But today that sugar-high, lonesome-in-the-crowd sound is emanating from choreographer Erika Shuch, our Fall Arts Preview cover star, who's leading her dance company through an a cappella rendition to close out the afternoon's rehearsal. As Tommy Shepherd holds up one wall of the studio, beatboxing out the rhythm, the rest of the Erika Shuch Performance Project – Dwayne Calizo, Jennifer Chien, and Danny Wolohan – fall in line, their righteous harmonies echoing through the space like those of a juvy hall teen-angst gospel choir.

" When he holds my hand I'm so proud / 'Cause he's not just one of the crowd / My baby, oh, he's the one / To try the things they've never done / Just because of what they say ..."

And then they drop into a shambling routine echoing those executed by the sharp-dressed singers on The T.A.M.I. Show or Ready Steady Go! Intersection staffers enter and immediately exit their impromptu stage, sidling through a nearby door like silent visitors from a forgotten slapstick who lost the joke but can't quite cease their loop through the space. But nothing breaks the group's concentration as Shepherd strolls over to the rest of the ESP and Shuch continues to wail, "He's a rebel, and he'll never be any good / He's a rebel, and he'll never ever be understood ..." The entire company breaks into an improvised dance, grinning and whirling off into gentle mashed potatoes or frugs of their own.

Comfortingly familiar yet terribly resonant enough to bring tears to one's eyes, "He's a Rebel" isn't the obvious song choice for 51802, a dance theater meditation on the impact of incarceration on those left behind on the outside. Somehow, in Shuch's poetic framework, it slides in among the original blues-imbued songs perfectly, like leather clinging to flesh.

" I'm just ... way into kitsch!" Shuch says with a girlish laugh after the rehearsal. Pale streaks shoot through her dark pigtails, and freckles race across her cheeks. "This piece has such a potential to be dark and self-important, and I feel like if I have a really hard day, I really like to listen to loud pop music in my car and, like, sing it dramatically. So I think it's a very natural, very real way of dealing with difficult situations, to sing these cheesy pop songs. That's a very real kind of relief that people seek and find."

With "He's a Rebel" and another song from 51802, Little Anthony and the Imperials' "I'm on the Outside (Looking In)," "you just have permission to be dramatic. You just have such permission to be such drama queens!" Shuch exclaims. "And I just love that. I don't want it to be like ..." Suddenly she breaks into a deathly dull, pretentious robot voice, " 'Oh, subtly expressing my feelings abstractly ...' I just want it to be so dramatic and so devastating and so the end-of-the-world kind of feeling."

It might have seemed like the end of the world when Shuch watched a loved one enter the California prison system three and a half years ago, the same year she won a Goldie for dance from the Guardian. Since then, the 33-year-old San Jose native has been running the Experimental Performance Institute she cofounded at New College to focus on activist, queer, and experimental performance and has choreographed or directed plays by Charles Mee at the Magic Theatre, Philip Kan Gotanda and Octavio Solís at Intersection, and Daniel Handler for Word for Word Theater. Unlike other productions, 51802 – which is being staged as part of the Prison Project, a yearlong interdisciplinary examination of the state's prison system at Intersection – cuts to the bone for the choreographer.

" It's something that I feel I've been doing for a while in abstract ways," Shuch says, discussing her 2004 work All You Need and her 2005 piece One Window. The latter concerned "physical and emotional confinement," while the former revolved around a German case of allegedly consensual cannibalism – "this situation of having a desire that kind of has no place in this world and being punished because you want something that doesn't fit and having the world look at these desires through a moral lens. Who has the authority or the power to say what is right or what is wrong when two people find something that they both want?"

" So I've been kind of ...," she says, laughing nervously, "floating around this theme for some years. This is the first time I'm coming out and saying this is actually what I'm making a piece about. It is something very specific, and we're using these abstract symbolic tales to speak to the feelings of what it's like to be on the outside, though the text that I speak is very straightforward."

Shuch recites an excerpt from her text, an explanation of 51802's title, which was inspired by the five-digit number given to each prisoner that takes the place of their name: "I had to write a little poem to remember his number. It went something like this: five is for your

fingers, one is for the star, eight is for the years you're locked up, zero is for your heart, and then there's a two. But the two is easy to remember. It's always about two – one on the inside, one on the outside, and zero for the heart."

Powerful words from someone acclaimed (Shuch recently won the prestigious Emerging Choreographers Award from the Gerbode Foundation) for the use of movement as her central mode of expression. But the text also bears the imprint of a creator who has long toiled as a resident at Intersection through the Hybrid Project, which builds bridges between artists working in different mediums.

Shuch directed *Domino* by Sean San Jose, Intersection's program director of theater, when it premiered with *Campo Santo* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 2005, and he was impressed by her ability to get people to "that trusting place" necessary to make great work. "Everything is very present to her, and everything is very real for her. She knows no bounds when she's onstage – there's no dance artifice. It's whatever the feeling is, and that sounds, wow, very heavy, but what I'm impressed with is how much life and air she lets in, and the way that she incorporates as many elements as possible is very exciting to watch and very inspirational."

51802 exemplifies Shuch's interdisciplinary megamix, melding movement, puppets, doo-wop, and two tales centered on one person stuck at the bottom of the well and another who yearns to be haunted by a ghost. During her Headlands Center for the Arts and Djerassi Institute residencies in the past year, Shuch mapped out the bones of the play before she began actualizing the piece with the ESP Project, beginning in mid-June.

At this point, a month from opening, the mood is frenetic, but the approach, Shuch says, is "the only way I know."

During the choreographer's writing process, she talked to other people who had loved ones on the inside and fictionalized or "translated" some of her own experience. "People are always going, 'Is it true or not true?' And I'm, like, 'Does it matter?' I just want to present it as a story of somebody that's on the outside. I mean, it's all true, and none of it is true, so it's riding that line between fiction and truth."

While collaborating with the rest of the ESP, Shuch might ask the players to spend 10 minutes writing, say, a rant to deliver to a mouse at the bottom of the well, or come up with a movement. She'll then edit it, and they'll piece it together, or they'll integrate the movement into the work, with choreographer Melanie Elms lending an outside eye to Shuch's moves.

“ They’re all incredible movers,” Shuch says of the ESP while munching a sliver of watermelon. “We all don’t have the same dance training. Two nights ago we had this rehearsal with Melanie where we realized there’s a section that actually should not be choreographed, that we should actually let them craft it for themselves because we don’t want everybody to be clones of each other all of the time. I mean, I want to build movement vocabularies, and it’s been really great also to have them amplify rather than just curb their instincts.”

Instinct is a primary driver for Shuch, a one-of-a-kind choreographer, far from yet very much a part of the Spector girl groups, specters, lonely cons, and rumbling streets below us. The daughter of a Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence investigator father and a Korean mother whose family was killed in the Korean War, she is, unsurprisingly, a bit of a contradiction — a little bit inside and outside, unable to talk openly about her felon and, despite his request, unable to stop herself from following the creative urge that is drawing her toward that unmentionable story. She’s gathering increasing attention here, yet she’s also eager to travel to South Korea to learn traditional dance and reenvision her mother’s folk tales. And she’s a choreographer who confesses, howling with laughter, that she would rather sit in a dark movie theater or go camping than see more dance. “I talk to so many dancers who are, like, ‘I never go see dance! I don’t like dance!’ ” she says, chuckling, before realizing, “I’m going to get in trouble, like, get fired for saying that.” But somehow the form continues to move her, “just because we can say things that we can’t say in any other way.”

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