

## A 'Window' Into Choreographer's Complex World

Rachel Howard | Special to The Chronicle | SF Chronicle | April 2005

Erika Shuch creates dances with startling, surprising results.

Erika Shuch's freckled face washes pale with embarrassment as she recounts her first work. "There were three of us, and I imagined we had a chain around us and we were trying to break out," she says. "I had people parading across the back of the stage in roller skates and tutus. My friend played the cello. We were all wearing black and we had on, like, lots of mascara."

She sighs and drops her head into her hands. It's a rainy afternoon at the Mission District's Intersection for the Arts, where Shuch is taking a break from rehearsals with her Erika Shuch Performance Project. "We played a Korean song my mom used to sing about a rabbit," she continues. "It was completely like, 'What's in my head?' "

Shuch laughs nervously, but an interviewer could be forgiven for doubting that first piece was really so bad. Since arriving in San Francisco five years ago, Shuch has been spilling the contents of her head onto the stage in surprising ways – with startling and often moving results.

Perhaps her breakthrough came in 2003 with "Vis-à-vis," in which her band of actor-dancers opened suitcases to find a knife, a cross-bow and finally a gun, while Johnny Cash's "The Beast in Me" played. Soon after, Intersection for the Arts asked Shuch to join its multidisciplinary Hybrid Project. Her next full-evening show, "All You Need," used a gruesome case of cannibalism as a metaphor for desire and drew such enthusiastic crowds that Intersection extended the run. Shuch's newest, "One Window," will run four weeks, an extraordinary luxury for a dance production.

Not that Shuch's work could easily be classified as dance. "For me, dance is always underlined by a story or theatrical impulse," she says. "It's 'performance.' That's the word I'm trying to use. The pressure comes when people say, 'Is it dance or is it theater?' It all starts blending together toward the common purpose of what the work wants to be."

"One Window" uses movement, but also singing, acting, a beatboxer and an assortment of power tools. The set design, by Sean Riley, has the performers building their confines during the course of the show. But as with most Shuch works, "One Window" began with an unlikely image.

"I kept thinking about that trash compactor in 'Star Wars,' " she says. "The walls are getting closer and closer – how do you react? You panic in the face of this doom, but there's also a moment of peace in the middle of the chaos. I'd like to believe that we're able to arrive at a moment of peace before the end comes, flash-bang."

Shuch's mental associations proliferated quickly. She thought about the unfathomable number of people in the world and about an article she'd read describing bodies buried inside the Great Wall of China. If the themes sound strikingly macabre, Shuch has never been one to shy from the thought of mortality. "For me looking at death doesn't seem like an infatuation with darkness," she says. "It's just as much about being infatuated with life and love and living."

Shuch, 30, has always lived with an awareness of emotionally intense situations. She grew up in San Jose, the daughter of an American serviceman and a Korean mother who did not talk about the traumas she'd suffered in war. At 17, Shuch dropped out of high school because she was feeling restless. She hitchhiked and camped on a Navajo reservation, and finally landed at UC Santa Cruz. There she attended a workshop led by the renowned San Francisco dance collective Contraband. And she saw that she could put the images in her head out into the world.

She made a piece with dancers wearing shredded prom dresses and banging garbage cans. A drama major named Sean Riley saw it and asked to meet with her, and they've been boyfriend and girlfriend – and collaborators – ever since.

Riley's set design for last year's "All You Need" rendered Intersection's tight space unrecognizable. Props lowered from the rafters on a mind-boggling set of pulleys. The live band sat on a tiny platform, high above the action. This year, Shuch says, the set design goes even further. The

folks at Intersection are thrilled, and not just about the architecture.

"I watched every single ESP Project show last year," says Sean San Jose, a member of Intersection's resident theater company, Campo Santo, "because you can't turn away from it. It's that honest."

Joe Goode, San Francisco's reigning maven of dance theater, couldn't turn away either. He called Shuch and asked her to partner with him for the new CHIME – Choreographers in Mentorship Exchange – program. He wanted someone to learn from, not just teach.

"She's working with elements the way she wants, rather than some prescribed way that dances are put together," he says. "That courage can't be taught. And the space itself is almost a player in the piece, and that's fascinating. This presents problems in terms of touring and becoming widely known, and I want that to happen for her. But I think there are presenters out there who could understand the work and pull it off."

The word Goode returns to is "intimacy," as in "I love that she insists on an intimacy with her audience." It's a quality that seems to seep through Shuch's pores with every hug she freely offers. At the end of rehearsal, she runs a section of the show – Vong Phrommala and Melanie Elms whirling wider and wider as the lyrics, with characteristic Shuch irony, talk instead of a space that is "too small." The dancing over, she gathers the cast into a circle, holding hands. The company does this after every rehearsal, sharing their thoughts in a feel-good ritual.

"I feel like Evette is a magician," a dancer says, referring to one of the show's composers.

"I feel like we're all magicians," another dancer says.

"It's a magic factory," Shuch says with a giddy wink, and the hug-fest begins.

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