

Festival Fare

San Francisco International Arts Festival: Sasha Waltz's *Travelogue 1: Twenty to eight*; Scott Wells' *What Men Want*.

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By

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Sasha Waltz & Guests in Waltz's *Travelogue 1: Twenty to eight*.

Although the [San Francisco International Arts Festival](#) was an early and major victim of the recession, the fest's intrepid director Andrew Wood forges ahead, making the very best of an unfortunate (and, one hopes, temporary) situation. The 2009 edition may have been trimmed by a week (thanks to the withdrawal of those vital funds from the city of San Francisco), but the dance companies remaining on the schedule testify to Wood's resourcefulness in engaging artists who make a difference, alter our perceptions and extend our vision. Given the impressive activity at local performance spaces this week, SFIAF deserves to survive—and flourish.

It was a brilliant stroke to bring back to the Bay Area for a two-night run the Berlin-based choreographer Sasha Waltz. Her company debuted at Cal Performances in 1999, encored there in 2001 and left a significant impression on a community that sees very little in the way of contemporary European dance theater. It seemed a bit odd for [Sasha Waltz & Guests](#) (as the troupe is called) to return with a revision of a piece made in 1993 (when the company was formed), but Thursday evening (May 28) at Fort Mason's Cowell Theater, *Travelogue 1: Twenty to eight* laid out the thematic and stylistic concerns that have propelled Waltz into the international limelight. I suspect that budgetary concerns and the dimensions of the Cowell stage may have determined the choice of repertoire.

This travelogue whisks us to one of Waltz's characteristic environments, in this case, a two-room apartment (designed by Thomas Schenk with claustrophobic enthusiasm), where the five performers flaunt their obsessions with narcissistic relish. Waltz's constant flurry of movement owes little to German dance theater matriarch Pina Bausch (as she made clear when I interviewed her a decade ago at her headquarters, the Sophiensaele, in the former East Berlin); she sees the roots of her style in American postmodernism. The performers cluster around a kitchen table, and later gravitate to a Murphy bed in an adjoining wall. Doors are slammed constantly; eyes peer through windows, catching the other performers unaware. The hostility that simmers beneath the surface emerges in moments of lacerating aggression.

These are people defined by their repetitive behavior. At the beginning of the 70-minute piece, Mamajeang Kim jabbars in Korean on a cell phone. Later, she and the other women, Yael Schnell (in Waltz's original part) and Florencia Lamarca favor unison arms. Edivaldo Ernesto, a charismatic performer from Mozambique, devours a loaf of bread, munches on an apple and strips to his underwear for an exercise session. Props acquire totemic value. Davide Campiani retrieves a rubber chicken from a ratty fridge and brandishes the poor bird like a totem. Everyone gets a solo moment in the spotlight, time enough to define character. I was much taken with Lamarca's insidious solo, during which she attempts to worm her way shamelessly into the audience's affection.

The bruising physicality of the piece places enormous strain on these remarkable performers, yet the violence seems to resolve itself in a kind of familiar routine. Waltz has always been sophisticated in her choice of music. Here, she has commissioned a jazzy score by Tristan Honsinger; it recalls Carl Stallings' cartoon soundtracks and the ironic tone keeps the movement from slipping over into the dire or unpalatable. If you recall Waltz's *Zweiland* and its examination of a partitioned Germany, houses divided against themselves are a preoccupation with this choreographer. It's comforting to learn that those concerns were there from the beginning. Now, who will import one of Waltz's more recent opera productions?



Scott Wells & Dancers in *WellsDream Dance for Two*.
Photo courtesy of Scott Wells & Dancers.

Waltz may be gone, but [Scott Wells & Dancers](#) will hang at CounterPULSE through this weekend. The growing army of the choreographer's fans will need little prompting from this source to attend, since the program offers all fresh material, breaking the cycle of revivals Wells has been delivering bewilderingly during the past couple of years. *What Men Want* is a four-part extravaganza that wrings beguiling variations on the myths of machismo bedeviling our culture by turning those myths on their heads and bouncing them a bit. Much of the material is deliriously funny.

There's more here, of course. Amid the satirical moments, one finds episodes steeped in a tenderness that Wells has infused into his often daredevil, contact improvisation-derived style. He celebrates the male (heterosexual) ethos, but skewers the intimations of omnipotence that come with the territory. Where the evening is going over its 100 minutes length is to *Call of the Wild*, a recreation of one of those 1960s-70s, conscious-raising group rituals that lent themselves too easily to parody. In fact, the trend has been satirized earlier in dance history, in Robert North's *Troy Game*, which Dance Theatre of Harlem used to trot out regularly on its tours.

But *Call of the Wild* is wittier and more focused. The eight barefoot guys, led by Sebastian Grubb, engage in primal shouts, atavistic grunts, martial arts maneuvers, kick-boxing episodes. They bounce off walls, strip to their skivvies and pose for a beefcake display. The performers come from several backgrounds and Wells exploits their adeptness at juggling and acrobatics. But the group spirit, the blurring of the distinction between premeditation and improvisation, is the element that proves most appealing. The cast also included Rajendra Serber, Andrew Ward, Cameron Growden, Cason MacBride, Ryder Darcy, Zack Bernstein and Aaron Jessup. The names were mostly new to me, but I suspect I will hear from them again.

Earlier in the evening, one found Wells in a more formal frame of mind in *Bach Solo Trio*, an essay set to the Stokowski orchestration of the composer's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor. Here, Suzanne Lappas proposed a few combinations, incorporated and adapted by Ward, Grubb and Growden. Wells uses the side wall and the floor with uncommon vehemence as dancers hit the sides and ricochet. Patterns do emerge, but what captivated this observer was the choreographer's mastery of dynamic. The legato phrasing that the choreographer brings to the contact improv vocabulary marks a significant development in Wells' evolving style, and it was heartening to experience.

Catch was more than a juggling exercise for Jessup, Bernstein and six red balls. The piece begins and concludes with one of the pair crumpled on the floor. It's all perfectly adroit, so slick that you're not sure whether the one fumble on Saturday (May23) was intentional or not. But there's something magical here, as the duo explores its mutual supportiveness. Make what you will of those six balls; Wells' dances encourage metaphors.

The evening opens on a more enigmatic note with what I gather is a revision of *Dream Dance for Two*. Made for the eight company men and five women, the dance is accompanied by an uncredited reading of a quasi-pornographic (and very amusing) story by Michelle Tea. It's amazing that the 13 performers do not collide in the intimate CounterPULSE space. We are inundated with bodies lifting each other, arms gesturing floridly, dancers corkscrewing into the floor and rising unvanquished. The mood is dreamy and controlled, but the spoken text never fuses with the movement. An ambitious misfire, perhaps, but the rest of the program hits the desired target.

Scott Wells and Dancers continues at CounterPULSE (1310 Mission St., San Francisco) through Sunday at 8 p.m., as part of the San Francisco International Arts Festival. Tickets: www.sfiaf.org, (800) 838-3006.