



Khecari

Sleeping Over at Khecari's House

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Two years ago, Jonathan Meyer and Julia Rae Antonick (collectively known as Khecari) began a movement exploration based on the question of relinquishing control. Is it possible, when moving, for the conscious mind to get out of the way? Can the body make choices without consulting the brain, and if so, what does that look like?

Attempts to answer this question have been part of a long running work in progress called "Orders from the Horse." "The Retreat," whose finale will take place Nov. 19 at Indian Boundary Park, is an expanded version of "Orders from the Horse," working perhaps toward a long-form durational work under the name "Teem."

Physiologically, no. You literally can't dance without the body consulting and being directed by the motor cortex in the brain. But the mind is a strange, elusive, and not altogether understood thing. So maybe, on a certain level, a dancer could reduce judgement or limit pre-conception of what movements he/she produces, and therefore relinquish control of the body. However, "The Retreat" isn't about that, exactly...

"The Retreat" offers three different viewing experiences, with a traditional concert length of about 90 minutes, an extended performance ending at midnight, or a whole overnight experience including a midnight meal, sleeping nest, movement "workshops" and morning coffee and pastries. Despite my hesitation (and general reluctance toward participatory performance "experiences"), I went for the whole banana, opting to stay overnight with about eight other people. I knew that if anyone could pull off such a logistically intricate evening, it was Khecari, who always (always) considers the audience's experience first.

So, I walked up to the Indian Boundary Cultural Center with my favorite pillow, slippers, and toothbrush in tow for my first sleepover party in about 20 years. I was greeted at the door, congratulated for bringing a pillow, and instructed to leave my phone in the box office. Apparently when Khecari says "retreat," they mean it, and the goal was to disconnect from the hustle bustle of the world. I admit that giving up my phone was initially terrifying, only because landlines aren't a thing anymore and I wanted some reassurance that we could be reached in case of emergency. The Rangers, seven dancer/docents who, in addition to performing, guided us throughout the evening quelled my fears, assuring me that someone would keep an eye on the phones so I didn't have to.

It sounds like an unimportant point, but I'm getting to why all of that matters. Despite the work's pivotal question on whether or not it's possible to move from a sub-cortical, sub-conscious place, its alternative goal of giving audience members a space to pull away from life for a while takes a whole lot of effort and strategy. The transitions between the evening crowd, the late crowd, and the overnights are exceptionally organized. There are intentional peaks built into the 12-hour score, but the ramping up and shifts between improv and choreography sneak up on you and you don't see a climax until you're in it. When they dance, the Rangers appear possessed, making contorted, slithering motions on their backs or on hands and knees. Yet the whole semi-morbid movement vocabulary it is surrounded by this gorgeously serene, incandescent world created by lighting designer Kat Sircio and long-time Khecari composer Joe St. Charles. Everyone – even Sircio and St. Charles – are costumed in Jeff Hancock's sophisticated, neutral-toned jammies.

Meyer and Antonick's eyes closed or barely closed as they moved in and out of stillness, in and out of contact with each other, in and out of the floor, all night long. As is almost always the case, these two partnering and improvising together are a treat on its own. They are periodically swaddled with big muslin cloths by the Rangers, who spend much of the first several hours lounging on the periphery of the space, complementing the ecru colored, cocoon-like set as a corps de ballet might. While the Rangers are clearly a supporting cast to Meyer and Antonick, they don't read like "Khecalettes," but rather are the bridge between the two of them and us. They model behaviors, letting us know through body language or by actually telling us that it's ok to sleep, or to take a break, or to lounge on one of the surprisingly soft and cozy pillow forts scattered throughout the space.

I was concerned at first that "The Retreat" was going to be hard work. Can I really watch 12 continuous hours of performance? The good news is: they don't expect you to. What is wholly unique about "The Retreat" is that it gives us permission to fade in and out of attention, permission to let great swaths of the dance not matter, permission to not work so hard to figure out its meaning, permission, even, to fall asleep. To be gently woken up by a dancer in the middle of her performance and invited to eat soup at midnight is an altogether new experience for me.

To allow us, the audience, the opportunity to relinquish control and witness a dance about relinquishing control, there was a lot to control. So while it seemed really self-serving to turn off the world, abandon my phone, and live in this magical land of visual, auditory, culinary and kinesthetic delights, it's also a really big ask for the performers, who have the responsibility of producing and managing that world. I wondered what the performers stood to gain by creating "The Retreat."

Which, I suppose, brings it back to the original question posed in "Orders from the Horse." I woke up in the middle of the night and saw Precious Jennings dancing alone, gloriously, in the center of the room. Twinkling lights and a delicate sound score accompanied her. I thought about Newton's law: that a body in motion stays in motion. I thought about [Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's](#) theory of flow. I thought that it's weird to be thinking about physics and sports psychology in the middle of the night. I then thought of some questions: Can a body in motion somehow sleep too? Or at least rest? What is it like to dance for an audience that you know is not watching? Does it change the purpose of dance? How could it not? I wrote some things down and then nuzzled back into my nest for some more sleep.

The next time I woke up, I noticed a change in the sky. I slowly came alive, reaching for a phone that wasn't there. I had no idea what time it was, and honestly, I didn't care.