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## DANCE REVIEW

# Turning the body into a dangerous machine

## The choreography is hyperphysical in Ledges and Bones' 'Mortar Between Bricks.'

By Victoria Looseleaf  
Special to The Times

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Alternating a 21st century Dorothea Lange/Walker Evans Dust Bowl vision and a more intimate view of couples interacting, Holly Johnston, artistic director of the locally based Ledges and Bones Dance Project, proved a fearless investigator of the human condition on Thursday at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica. The occasion was the debut of "Mortar Between Bricks," a 65-minute, intermissionless series of tableaux set to a hypnotic soundscape by Rafe Mandel augmented by spare video projections by Johnston and Erik Speth.

Formerly of the hyperphysical now-defunct troupe Tongue, Johnston is mining similar territory: the body as punishing machine. Shrouded in stillness, "Mortar" begins with a Butoh-like prelude: four dancers facing the audience while inching forward and another four on the floor, as if appendages. Bleak visuals of a chain-link fence and a lone parking meter unspool behind them before Johnston and Speth launch into a dark-night-of-the-soul duet.

To the sounds of thrumming rain and a tolling bell, the couple, lying prone, spoon, sway and sprawl. Then, after a quick blackout, Nguyen Nguyen is revealed in Johnston's stead. Resembling a monk in baggy pants and layers of wrap-like skirting (serviceable costumes by Johnston), he picks up the tempo, executing deep lunges, an astonishing backward bend and pliés that bleed into somersaults.

An aura of dangerous beauty prevails, with a head-cradling motif butting up against frenetic, arm-flailing unisons and full-body twitchings. At one point, Johnston sits in repose à la Rodin's "Thinker," but on the bended legs of a horizontal Speth.

Arletta Anderson, ramrod straight and stretched high on the balls of her feet, appears to grapple with demons before hurling herself backward as if into an abyss. Later, Sarri Sanchez and Jeremy Hale find themselves performing a waltz-like pas de deux, she ultimately tossing him aside cavalierly before he makes use of a wall to partner Wendy Samuels: Holding her aloft with her feet against the surface, Hale rotates the statuesque Samuels like a kebab, control being the issue here.

Throughout, Kristie Roldan's evocative lighting helps create moods that swing like pendulums, until Samuels, finally, makes a last, achingly slow entrance in a voluminous skirt, her arms upraised as if praying for salvation.

Life is hard and then you die — or dance, as the case may be.

\*

Ledges and Bones Dance Project

**Where:** Highways Performance Space, 1651 18th St., Santa Monica

**When:** 8:30 p.m. today and 6:30 p.m. Sunday

**Price:** \$18 and \$20

**Contact:** (310) 315-1459

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