

Blind Faith: zoe | juniper's *Clear and Sweet*

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

When choreographer Zoe Scofield was first introduced to the early American acappella traditions of shape note, or Sacred Harp, singing in a video at the Okefenokee Heritage Center near her parents' home in Gainesville, Georgia, she burst into tears.

The rural, inclusive art form reawakened her memories of growing up in the South. As she later told interviewer Benjamin Morris, shape note singing was "the closest to the sensation of dancing in a group that I've experienced without having any physical activity."

Back at their Seattle home, Scofield and her husband and collaborator, video artist and sculptor Juniper Shuey, began attending local shape note singing sessions.

"In shape note singing, there's no judgment on whether you can sing or not," Shuey has said.

"You're allowed to not hit your notes and not be judged for it, and that's what drew me in. This acceptance of everyone's singing personality is what makes the sound what it is and what makes the community what it is—so how do we make choreography that can do that?"

Clear and Sweet is one answer to that question.

zoe | juniper returns to the Bates Dance Festival for the third time this summer. When the company appeared in 2008 with the feverish, broken classicism of *the devil you know is better than the devil you don't*, the company was so new that they hadn't yet settled on a name. *A Crack in Everything*, presented in 2011, solidified the company's reputation for surreal and memorable stage images including dancers plastered in gold leaf and performers barking at each other like penned dogs.

Scofield and Shuey spend at least a year working on each full-length production. Supported by a 2015 Guggenheim grant, Scofield was able to enter deeply into the music and the world that created it, a community of religious faith, hardscrabble effort, and communal devotion.

Shuey's decor sets the frame in which the life of this community plays out its struggles. The fringed ceiling installation lit by Amiya Brown is animated by digital projections that imply the coexistence of past and present. Some members of the audience sit on the stage, part of the action, referencing the "hollow square" formations of shape note singing, where each singer takes a turn standing in the center leading a song from their hymnals. For most performances of *Clear and Sweet*, the audience is invited to join in the singing from their seats.

In *Clear and Sweet*, the dancers -- Scofield plus Ana Maria Lucaciu, Navarra Novy-Williams, Troy Ogilvie and Dominic Santia, are repeatedly blindfolded. This striking image -- perhaps suggested by another line from Whitman, about the delights and sorrows of a "Blind, loving, wrestling touch" -- becomes both choreographic strategy and metaphoric enactment. Like the faithful, the dancers have no

option but to trust that they can learn to navigate. Their dependence is both resisted and relished. The blindfold, Scofield likes to point out, is in the service of "a new form of stability," a way for the dancers to learn to be comfortable, and proceed, in circumstances of unfamiliarity, ambiguity and risk.

The choreography is built of Scofield's distinctive, post-ballet vocabulary of deep collapses and twitches, hiked hips and torqued arms. The dancers' bodies always seem to crave an unwinding from twist and a release from compression. The singing may be traditional and the dancing unequivocally contemporary, but they reinforce one another. Within the hollow square of the performance and the rise and fall of the hymns, a single, imperfect human being is allowed -- no, even better, encouraged -- to reach for clarity and solace.

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