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GREATER NEW YORK

Summer Meltdown

A Sneak Peek at Noémie Lafrance's 'Melt'

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT A26



Shari Schwartz (2)

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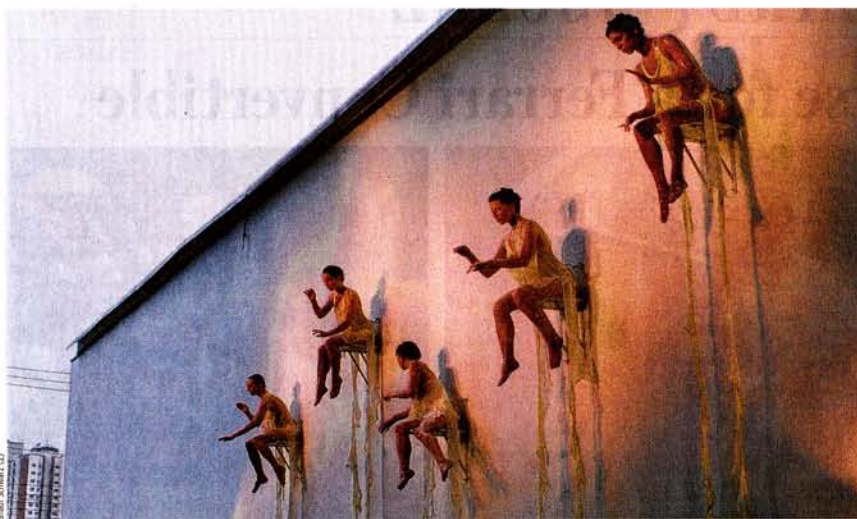
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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Shari Schwartz (2)



In Noémie Lafrance's 'Melt,' dancers perform as their costumes, made of cheesecloth soaked in beeswax and lanolin, dissolve—creating the illusion that the performers themselves are melting.

A Downtown Dance Meltdown

Local Choreographer Brings 'Melt' Home

By PIA CATTON

Noémie Lafrance has made a career out of presenting dance within unlikely spaces. She's worked in a Lower East Side parking garage and on the roofs of buildings designed by Frank Gehry. Her latest site, from Aug. 19 to 29, is a concrete wall near the Salt Pile, a storage location for salt (which the city uses to melt snow) at the corner of Pike Slip and South Street.

But "Melt" isn't just about its location.

Near the salt pile is a concrete wall into which Ms. Lafrance has bolted small ledges at varying heights. Seated on them will be dancers wearing costumes made of cheesecloth soaked in beeswax and lanolin. As the dancers (harnessed to the seats) perform the precise choreography, their cos-

tumes will drip off their bodies, creating the illusion that the dancers are melting.

"It's a spectacle, but it's also a meditation," Ms. Lafrance said.

The meditation is on themes including heat, exhaustion, isolation and the question of physical change. "It's a feeling that their bodies are changing into another state, from solid to liquid. There is a mutation," the choreographer said.

The piece itself has transformed from its beginnings. When Ms. Lafrance unveiled "Melt" in 2003, it was a 12-minute work-in-progress presented at the Black & White gallery in Williamsburg. Now, after taking it to Montreal, Copenhagen and São Paulo, Ms. Lafrance has expanded the work to more than 30 minutes, including an introduction, with New York City as her stage.

"What we're doing is showing the city back to the people," she said. "I like this space because it is far away in Manhattan. It's hard to get far away in Manhattan."

The Quebec-born, Clinton Hill-based Ms. Lafrance founded her company, Sens Production, in 2001. Like many small dance enterprises, Sens has encountered its share of fund-raising struggles. Though she has three year-round employees, the payroll expands to several dozen people when a show is up. And grants don't necessarily cover the issues of personnel. "It's hard when you're growing. There's a gap when you are trying to get to the next level," she said.

She has, however, balanced her artistic projects with lucrative commercial work. The music video for Feist's "1,2,3,4," which was distributed on the iPod Nano, features her choreography. She's also made commercials for Daffy's and Bloomingdale's.

In her dance-on-film projects, Ms. Lafrance explores the technique of capturing dance and movement seamlessly. Her video for "1,2,3,4," for example, was filmed in one long shot. Her 10-minute short film "Eyes Nose Mouth," part of which was shot

on Rockaway Beach and can be seen on imdb.com, took up the idea from an artistic perspective. "A lot of times, film relies on editing. But you can create rhythm in the content of a scene and in how you shoot it," she said.

Her live, staged work has also been highly cinematic. "I've always wanted to mix the aesthetic of film with the opportunities of performance. So you can go to a show and experience it almost like you're in a film."

She was particularly successful in creating that experience with her 2004 work "Noir." Staged at the Delancey & Essex Municipal Parking Garage, "Noir" was full of dance vignettes that suggested film-noir narratives. The audience viewed it while sitting in parked cars. "The windshield was really like a frame," she said.

With "Melt," the dramatic setting creates the idea that one is watching a scene unfold in its natural environment—taking place with or without an audience. "It's not like we're going in a park and setting up a stage. It's like going in a park, and you still feel like you're in a park—it's all around you," Ms. Lafrance said.

The movement of "Melt" is at times theatrical and, for the most part, somewhat restricted: Because the dancers are seated, the choreography focuses on the arms and upper body. And the choreographer hasn't layered it with inscrutable layers of meaning. As she put it: "It speaks to your body, but it's not obscure or intellectual. It's physical."

'It speaks to your body, but it's not obscure or intellectual, Ms. Lafrance said. 'It's physical.'