

Rachel Dickstein Dancing the Unseen



The director is taking choreography to the next level

Ripe Time's *Innocents* in 2005, directed by Rachel Dickstein.

RACHEL DICKSTEIN

BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

REWriting text is easy, but how do you rewrite movement?

In a Brooklyn rehearsal for *Fire Throws*, a variation on Sophocles that utilizes Balinese dance, Antigone 1 (Laura Butler) moves toward the spot where her dead brother lies unburied. Should the Chorus hold her, undulate and release her, the director Rachel Dickstein wonders—or do they expel her? Might Antigone 1 simply pass through the cluster of Chorus members—or possibly over them? Does the Chorus stand still? Or does it rotate to block Antigone 1's way? Each choice reads differently, since each movement redefines Antigone 1's action at this crucial moment—an action described by the Sentry but never seen in the classic play that is *Fire Throws*'s source.

This revision in rehearsal, happening after two workshops and still not locked down, constitutes the key element of Rachel Dickstein's work method. An imagist, she moves fluidly between text and dance, always attending to a narrative line. The result is a unique style critics have noted in the work her company, Ripe Time, has done since its formation in 2000.

"Some directors who do stunning things have an overlay—the images don't explore the text," says Morgan Jenness, a Ripe Time fan from the first, who signed on as the *Fire*

Throws dramaturg and recently became Dickstein's agent. Ripe Time's scripts, images and gestures relate to each other like the parts of a sentence, Jenness continues, adding, "The movement is the verb, the image is the adjective, and the text is the noun." This integration, combined with the lyricism of Dickstein's style, reminds Jenness of the works of one of Dickstein's mentors, the celebrated director/choreographer Martha Clarke.

Fire Throws, performing this month at 3LD Art & Technology Center in Lower Manhattan, may be Dickstein's strongest fusion yet, and a telling exploration of the question that has animated all her work: What is a woman's power in the world?

Attention to text came naturally to Dickstein, a daughter of Queens College English professor Morris Dickstein and the critic/memoirist Lore Dickstein. Her focus on movement developed during her college years at Yale. It was in her senior year, 1992, that noun, verb and adjective (theatrically speaking) all came together, thanks in part to an obsession with Virginia Woolf that could only be worked out on stage—in an adaptation of Woolf's radical novel *The Waves*. "The novel has descriptions of environments and dialogue," Dickstein recalls—but why must one actor tackle both in transferring the novel to the stage? In her production, the dialogue was



performed by six actors, while the descriptions of environments were wordlessly performed by six dancers. The two groups merged at the evening's end. "It was the start of what she's become known for now," says composer Vijay Iyer, a classmate and future collaborator of Dickstein's who remembers the show vividly. "Her specialty has become adapting these non-theatrical literary texts for the stage, and finding lyrical ways to do that with movement, creating a visual palette that is intoxicating but also has a stillness."

Dickstein pursued this kind of movement-based, company-created work single-mindedly after she left Yale. She used her participation in the NEA/TCG Career Development Program for Directors to observe such ensemble companies as Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis, Complicite in England, Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago—"work I felt akin to," Dickstein says.

THE PEAK OF THAT GRANT PROGRAM

was two months in Bali. "It was mind-blowing," the dark-haired director enthuses. "It's amazing to be in a place where every person has trained as a dancer, painter and musician. They might work in the rice fields or rent motorcycles to tourists, but every person has practiced some artistic craft. Everyone is so finely attuned to creative work—on a bus that passes a temple, you hear a gamelan, and everyone taps out the rhythm, because they had played it or danced to it."

But Dickstein didn't casually toss in the movement style she learned during her Indonesian sojourn. She's never created a

Balinese *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, for instance. Yet beginning with Ripe Time's debut production, *The Secret of Steep Ravines* in 2000, one could glean the influences. "There's always a pre-show," Dickstein says of the structure of Ripe Time evenings, because after seeing the Balinese performing "in temples, for gods, not for people," she could no longer step into a theatre space without feeling the need for spiritual preparation. "I want to feel that both time and space have been transformed," she says.

Unlike her previous works, *Fire Throws* draws specifically from Balinese dances. After the Depression-era-girl adventures of *Steep Ravines*, the treacherous Gilded Age–society stratagems of *Innocents* (derived from Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*), and the triptych of marriage stories from Jhumpa Lahiri, Anton Chekhov and S. Ansky that formed *Betrothed*, her approach to Sophocles' ancient morality play needed a different kind of gesture, a different kind of strength.

"My version of *Antigone* is a kind of answer to 'the doomed heroine': She gets what she wants, and she is quite powerful in her death," Dickstein says. Her version splits Antigone's character in two to focus both on her actions—her choice to die in the cave where she's been sentenced—and the deeper process of understanding the meaning of the choices she has made in the moment. "The second Antigone discovers something about herself—that she acted *for herself*, and not just as a symbol of defiance," Dickstein says. The doubling was arrived at after two three-week-long workshops, in the Ripe Time development style, which began with as many as six Antigones.

In this case, "I looked to the movement I learned in Bali because it has such sharpness and power—I thought it would wake up the vocabulary I had used before," the director reasons. "She kept talking about the warrior-like energy she was drawn to—that irresistible energy," says actor Erica Berg, who plays Antigone 2. "Learning Balinese dances got us using our bodies in a different way."

To create a war milieu described by Sophocles' Chorus (and which explains Antigone's back-story), the director draws from a *baris* warrior dance—feet planted, shoulders up near the head, and eyes darting to the side, aggressive and tense. The movements "come from the qualities of the dance, not from its specifics," Dickstein says. "The dance also says something epic. Ariane Mnouchkine uses kathakali when staging Greek plays. Asian

movements give a heightened theatricality to what a chorus does."

All Ripe Time performers need to act and move—some are former dancers, others were schooled in Growtowski methods or at New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing. Whatever their backgrounds, they are much more than instruments. As Berg notes, "Rachel is quite open in the creative process, especially when we are improvising. She creates a space where you can do whatever, then she sculpts and selects."

THE SIX-WEEK 3LD RUN OF FIRE

Throws is Ripe Time's longest one yet, and the show is intended to tour. While Dickstein once eschewed the jobbed-in director's life, she now feels ready to take on classic plays like *Three Sisters* or *The Tempest*, or operas like *Pelleas and Melisande*, wherever they might be offered. She thinks the fidelity she shows to narrative will serve her well. "I'm not trying to deconstruct—I'm just trying to tell the story. A project only works if the heart of it has truth of the characters' situations in the moment."

In addition to running Ripe Time, teaching directing at Fordham University and serving as a teaching artist for the Lincoln Center Institute, Dickstein has a four-year-old son with her husband, Newyorker.com editor Blake Eskin, and is expecting another child in June. Despite the stresses of pregnancy, says Paula McGonagle, who acted for Dickstein in *Innocents* and is both actor and associate director for *Fire Throws*, Dickstein never loses her cool: "A tautness in her tone is as crazy as it gets. She keeps it metered. That's part of her success, being so clear."

Beyond *Fire Throws* may be a return to Woolf: actor-playwright Ellen McLaughlin and Dickstein are now exploring ways to stage *Septimus and Clarissa*, their hoped-for stage version of *Mrs Dalloway*. "It has a theatrical element to it," says McLaughlin, speaking from Washington, D.C., where she is rehearsing Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* at Arena Stage. "Woolf is fascinated by simultaneity, multiple layers of experience that are going on at all times."

What could be more tailor-made for the Dickstein aesthetic? As she imagines the project, "The text gets distilled and distilled, while the movement grows and grows." 🎭

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