

MOVING WITH THE MEMORIES: TABLE OF SILENCE 9/11 TRIBUTE IN REVIEW

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"Moving With the Memories" by Pia Catton

There was no grand entrance, no curtain-up moment. Instead, dancers in white gradually emerged on the edges of Lincoln Center's Josie Robertson Plaza. Their movements foreshadowed doom: some falling, some with head in hands, some with arms outstretched to sky, but all lunging forward.

Then, forming straight lines, the procession slowly marched to Revson Fountain with only a drum beat to keep time. "Like a heartbeat," said choreographer Jacquelyn Buglisi, whose public tribute to the events of 9/11, titled "The Table of Silence Project," was performed Sunday morning.

Ms. Buglisi designed the work to begin at 8:20 a.m. and end at 8:46 a.m., when the first plane hit the North Tower. During those 26 minutes, 100 dancers circled the fountain with simple, repetitive gestures that served as a profound reminder of the innocence of the victims. Hidden inside a pocket in the dancers' robes were ceramic plates—symbols of sharing and nourishment—designed by the Italian artist Rosella Vasta. The dancers nearest the fountain performed a series of extensions—offering the plates upward or hugging them to their chests—while two concentric circles of dancers sat still. At 8:46 a.m., they all sat for a minute of silence.

"That time is eternal for us," Ms. Buglisi said. "It is part of our memory. Man has a memory throughout history. This is what drives us to the future: not forgetting. Some people say, 'Oh, we need to move on.' But the way to move on is to acknowledge your past and take it with you. That is the thing of courage—you fear, and you step into it."

For Ms. Buglisi, thinking in grand terms comes naturally. But even more natural is expressing those thoughts in dance. For 20 years, she was part of the Martha Graham Dance Company. For 12 of those years, she was a principal dancer, which exposed her to some of the most dramatic roles in the repertory. She then shifted into creating choreography for her own company, and teaching at the Martha Graham School, the Juilliard School and the Ailey School, where she has been the chairwoman of the Modern department for 22 years.

With "The Table of Silence," Ms. Buglisi illustrates the power of the modern dance vocabulary, and how it remains vital through the generations. Martha Graham's choreography grappled with the darker side of human nature (though not exclusively), often retold through ancient Greek tales. Working with that tragic tradition and drawing on her own creativity, Ms. Buglisi found a way to express a collective grief that is now a decade old.

"It's very connected to Martha's style of working—I learned about structure and staging by sitting next to Martha," she said, citing Graham's works "Lamentation" and "Steps in the Street" as creative foundations for this project. "That's part of my heritage. I hope I pass on information to my students, and they are able to inform their work with it."

Creating "The Table of Silence Project" was a yearlong effort in logistics, including the collaboration with Ms. Vasta, whose sculpture of 100 white plates provided inspiration. The dance work came together with just a few rehearsals in studios donated by STEPS on Broadway. Ms. Buglisi, in partnership with the service organization Dance/NYC, put out an open call to dancers in August. It wasn't a typical audition.

"We kept everybody," she said. "We thought this would be a representation of the dance community."

The project drew 100 dancers ranging in age from 15 to 60. And the participants—all of whom volunteered their time—came from different parts of the New York dance community: Buglisi Dance Theatre, the Juilliard School, the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, the Ailey School, National Dance Institute, Ballet Hispanico, STEPS on Broadway, Peridance Capezio Center and the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School.

The open call stated clearly that the work would be a "prayer for the city" on Sept. 11. "We asked every dancer to answer, 'Why do you want to do this?' Some said, 'It gives me an opportunity to help make a difference.' Some talked about creating a sense of healing and remembrance. One wrote, 'I lost friends on 9/11, and my cousin was killed in Afghanistan.'"

For this columnist, "Table of Silence" stood out among the many anniversary events worth attending because of Ms. Buglisi's 2002 work "Requiem," which responded to the attacks of 9/11 with images of stillness, beauty and infinite strength. I hoped "Table of Silence" would share those elements, and it did. It was not only a prayer, but a gift of dance to the city.

As the choreographer put it: "Sometimes things are so deep that they are ineffable, unutterable—only expressed through the body."

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