

New Dance Work Considers Service

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Risa Jaroslow & Dancers performs “At Your Service,” which asks how do we serve, how are we served and how do we serve something bigger than ourselves?

“I always start a piece from something I’m thinking and asking questions about,” says dancer/choreographer Risa Jaroslow.

She is sitting on the floor of a dance studio in Emeryville with five dancers, one monologist (Arisika Razak, a former nurse-midwife) and composer/vocalist Amy X Neuburg. Jaroslow’s company, Risa Jaroslow & Dancers, has just finished a rehearsal of several segments of her latest

world premiere, “At Your Service,” which had started, in Jaroslow’s mind, with the question: How do we serve, how are we served and how do we serve something bigger than ourselves?

The company has been exploring those ideas deeply and personally, as is evident in the pieces that were rehearsed that afternoon. The interactions among the dancers, as they transformed into expressive movement the theme of the piece—the ambiguous relationships between society’s servers, especially the underappreciated, and the served—was intense and focused, a fluid pastiche of lifting, supporting, opposing and watchfully guarding that was sometimes playful, sometimes anxious, sometimes cold and impassive, sometimes grim, as when female dancers crawled slowly across the floor like beasts of burden with male dancers lying across their backs. Sometimes Neuburg’s layered score—prerecorded for rehearsal, but to be performed live—was cacophonous, distorted, reflecting the onstage drama. The intent, as Jaroslow wrote for the show’s producer, ODC, is to “delight, edify, sometimes disturb and ultimately help us see many of our fellow humans in a different light. “

Since Jaroslow’s career began in 1974, the work of the acclaimed New York postmodern choreographer has been seen nationally and internationally. Relocating to the [Bay Area](#) in 2013, she produced the West Coast premiere of “Resist/Surrender” in 2015 (the San Francisco Chronicle’s dance correspondent lauded the “distinctive quality” she brought to the local dance scene, calling her an imaginative performer) and the world premiere of “Touch Bass” in 2017. Along the way, she has taught at various colleges and universities, including Mills College, and has had extended residencies abroad.

To begin this new project, one section of which was partly inspired by a [New York Times](#) article on harassment and mistreatment of (mostly) women in the food service industry, she met first with Neuburg, long known for mixing live looping technologies with electronic percussion. Jaroslow was a Neuburg fan and knew it would be an exciting challenge to work with the lyrics the innovative musician would write for the piece. “Risa approached me with this vague idea about service, and then slowly, kind of magically, it has turned into real art,” says Neuburg.

When Jaroslow went on to select the dancers, the movement part of the process began, but not before she asked them to each share a personal experience related to the theme. “I think we all are server and served

in [different parts](#) of our lives,” she says. Dancer Kevin Lopez talked about being a barista, a receptacle for others’ confidences; Scott Marlowe described feeling invisible as a waiter for a catering service. Jaroslow herself waited tables in a restaurant in the Catskills.

Early in the development process, the dancers began improvising. In one improv, one dancer stood beneath another; they were beginning to create duets that were not so much about partnership, explains Jaroslow, but literally about one dancer serving another. They worked on solos in which the task of the soloist was to perform without assistance; they switched out the partnerships so that different server/servee relationships emerged; they improvised from prompts suggesting that dancers inevitably serve something bigger than themselves. “We immediately touched on the dancer/choreographer dynamic,” recalls dancer Emily Daly. “Is the audience serving us?” wonders Neuburg. “Are we serving the audience? Is the dancer serving the choreographer?” Dancer, choreographer, audience—it’s a confusing triangle, she points out.

As the movement developed, Jaroslow was also busy building layers of complexity into the structure of the piece, which will be performed in the round, close to the audience. She and Neuburg interviewed people in the community, which resulted in six participants (a math teacher, a consultant to social justice nonprofits, a hospice nurse, one of the SFFD’s first female fire fighters, a woman who’d served in the Navy and Razak, the nurse-midwife) whose short monologues about specific work-related experiences will be delivered in person at each performance (except for an additional monologue, by Lopez, which is recorded). The monologues are interwoven into the dance segments in various ways, each segment unique in the relationship of speaker to movement and sound. “We brainstormed before they rehearsed with us, but once that person was in the room, sharing their story, that’s when we really started to piece together how we could support their experience,” says dancer Anna Greenberg. “I think it’s about making space for someone’s personal experience and putting that oftentimes way before your dancer self or ego.”

In addition to the monologues, the dancers sing several songs that Neuburg composed. Onstage, she will create percussion and make sounds, using her own voice and sometimes looping it—repeating and occasionally adding long notes on top, a combination of prerecorded and live sound.

And at one point, Jaroslow dances and the two sing; the duet, says Jaroslow, “has to do with the tension between serving your art and serving the people in your life for whom you have some responsibility.”

For the dancers, “At Your Service” was ultimately a process of connecting the movement they’d created to a sense of real rage at society’s injustices. In one segment, about waiting tables, says Daly, “Those are real feelings, of being a woman on display, vulnerable.”

“When you see dancers, you see their stories,” notes Jaroslow. “I think you bring every aspect of your lived experience to dance.”

After a year of work on the project, six weeks before performance and several days after the rehearsal, Jaroslow emails a post-script: She agrees with Neuburg that it’s amazing the way a vague idea can turn into art. “You don’t get from the vague idea to the finished work without going through a period of chaos that is always hard, even when you’ve been through it many times before. Each time it makes you question what you’re doing in big and small ways. But you can’t get to the good stuff without going through the chaos. I’ve learned to embrace it in my best moments and tolerate it in my hardest moments but at least now I’m able to remind myself that I will get to the other side of it.”