

frieze

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By Lyra Kilston

robbinschilds



Sonya and Layla Go Camping, the latest performance by New York-based choreography/dance duo robbinschilds (Layla Childs and Sonya Robbins), incorporated raw celery, the hands of God and a simulated campfire into a Möbius strip of movement, video and meta-choreography. The piece opened with three dancers taking down half a dozen camping tents. The repetitive tasks of folding tent poles and collapsing tents evolved from functional to lyrical, ending in lovely swoops of billowing fabric. Soon, we heard Childs and Robbins off-stage, discussing the performance itself via walkie-talkie, finessing details and allowing a glimpse into their affable collaborative process, which they have been developing for the past six years.

The banter then veered into stoner territory: when one of the off-stage voices suggested the dance should include feeling like you were in God's hands, they began to imagine what kind of hands God has. They agreed on puffy white gloves, and soon afterward a dancer (Michael Helland) entered naked but for said gloves, to dance a fluid, glove-waving sequence. The gloved man, or 'God', then danced in sync with Robbins while she talked with Childs, who continued to offer direction from off-stage. The two women's playful dialogue riffed on

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rhymes of the word ‘dance’ until ‘God’ asked: ‘Have you ever been to France?’ This signaled the screening of a short video on-stage (pictured top), which repeated verbatim the planning, punning dialogue we had just heard, except *en français*. The video was filmed in Paris as the women re-enacted scenes from Jacques Rivette’s 1974 surrealist film *Céline and Julie Go Boating*.

The film’s French title – *Céline and Julie vont en bateau* – plays on the double meaning of ‘*vont en bateau*’, which also means, ‘to get caught up in a story’. As in the mind-bending film – a riddle of repetition and doubling – *Sonya and Layla* handled narrative as a set of Matryoshka dolls, paying homage to the tactics of ‘60s performance by folding the process of making a dance into the work itself.

Critic Jonathon Romney once described Rivette’s film as ‘an exemplary feminist narrative in which two women control the fiction-making process.’ This is a useful way in which to approach robbinschilds’ latest work, as well as their 2007 piece *C.L.U.E. (Color Location Ultimate Experience)*, in which the duo danced in multi-hued abandon in empty American landscapes, creating a fantastical vision that, like *Céline and Julie’s* phantom Paris, was largely devoid of men.

But playing with a film that larked around with a grab-bag of cinematic and narrative tropes can be dizzying, and there were moments at which the repetition and references lagged. Yet, *Sonya and Layla* offered many resplendently surprising moments, such as the segment in which the dancers sat in a circle passing around carrots, nuts and celery. They took turns chewing loudly, using an effects pedal to loop the sound into a layered, crunching rhythm. (David Byrne, seated a few rows ahead, seemed fully absorbed.) The dancers engaged with the new soundtrack in a series of arm swings, pelvis undulations, and even jazz hands, then the tents returned for a moment and hand-shaped white plastic chairs rolled across the stage. The denouement of this romp saw the dancers sitting serenely on stage, cross-legged around a red spotlight/campfire. No one quite knew when the performance was supposed to end; Childs and Robbins discussed that as well, of course, until we were prompted by the recorded sound of swelling applause.