

***Light Doesn't Have Arms to Carry Us***

Choreographer/performer: Preethi Athreya

**3 September 2015 | 8pm | SOTA Studio Theatre**

**Reviewed by Leonard Ng**

**Theme and Variations**

*La lumière n'a pas de bras pour nous porter — Light Doesn't Have Arms to Carry Us —* is a musical work for piano by the contemporary French composer Gérard Pesson. The piece is three and a half minutes long and treats the piano primarily as a percussion instrument, with the performer's fingernails steadily strumming against the lacquered keyboard to create a metronome-like effect. Actual notes are only sounded at seemingly random intervals, as if a cat were walking on the keys. Preethi Athreya's project is an attempt to give an impression of this unusual music... without the music itself.

Athreya's fifty-minute meditation on musical embodiment takes place for the most part in silence (Pesson's composition is played only once, in the very last minutes of the show). The audience is therefore forced to give attention entirely to the movements and sounds Athreya makes upon the dimly-lit stage: foot stamps, punctuated breathing, a table being dragged, and the creak of the wooden floor beneath her weight. She is backed by an odd series of video projections: hissing static, the interior of a piano, a conductor's arms waving in silence. We are led into a sort of introspective yogic reverie as vignette after vignette goes by, everyone a variation upon Pesson's musical theme. None of them lasts for very long.

This long, slow pavane could have gone on interminably, but thankfully Athreya has incorporated a theme entirely her own: the journey from constriction to liberty. She begins her performance in a tiny box of light in an upstage corner, clad in a red dress with her arms trapped inside, empty sleeves swinging freely. She can express herself only through weight shifts and wiggling torso movements. She moves from box to symbolic box: one sequence has her lying down, listlessly silhouetted before an overturned table, moving her arms desultorily. Towards the end, she executes pose after Bharatanatyam pose in a long narrow box of light until she finally manages to walk out of it and occupy centre stage. But this added material, while dramatically satisfying, seems less of an attempt to express Pesson's music in choreography and more of an attempt to keep the piece from becoming boring.

And therein lies the conceptual weakness of this admittedly high-concept performance. There is little real development going on – each vignette does little more than introduce possible directions for future action. The effectiveness of the piece thus has less to do with the choreography than with Preethi Athreya's considerable stage presence and sinuous, controlled physicality. The exact same piece, in the hands of a lesser performer, would have been painfully tedious. It is Athreya's attitude of full commitment and the sheer intensity of her inward gaze that draws the audience in. *Light Doesn't Have Arms to Carry Us* is a successful work. But in this case it is the performer, and not the material, who truly drives that success.