

River dance

Apollinaire Scherr reports on New York's River to River festival

Some New York arts festivals are easy to find. Central Park SummerStage (until August 29) and Lincoln Center Out of Doors (beginning on July 24) announce their location in their names, with blasting music and blazing lights directing you to the big stage.

River to River has geography in its name too. For a month of summer, four dozen events, ranging from street games to a peripatetic percussion orchestra, take over Manhattan's southern end. But the shows are scattered from the Hudson to the East River in locales both well-trodden and obscure. And the dance events do not use a stage. The choreographers conceive the work around their chosen patch of Lower Manhattan – their theatre.

The star of Third Rail Projects' *Roadside Attraction* is a 1977 pop-up mini camper van. It not only demarcates the performance space from the rest of the vast One New York Plaza but also serves as a time capsule, transporting us back to the innocent beginnings of that American convention of bringing the house – or its best approximation – with us on camping trips.

The nuclear family in *Roadside Attraction* packs its troubles as well. The story, about the fantasy life that settles in beside real life, may have been predictable enough, as were the six dancers' rough-and-tumble moves, but what the hour lost in subtlety it gained in legibility – crucial for a noon-time outdoor show. When the frustrated wife sunbathed on her square of AstroTurf like a pin-up, her wonky husband may have remained oblivious but the suits returning from lunch stopped in their tracks.

Feeling is Believing – which is co-sponsored by Elastic City, curator of idiosyncratic artist-led walks in cities worldwide – was not meant for stumbling upon. We had to make a reservation and show up – the 12 of us – at 100 Wall Street, where we were whisked to the 21st floor. The performers turned out to be us, with the hypnotically soothing choreographer Luciana Achugar as our guide.

The first thing we did was look out the window. High-rises crowd Wall Street's east end, so at street level you cannot tell where you are. But in the empty offices of the 21st floor, we could see swaths of rippling grey river and impassive grey sky in the gaps between the mass of steel and glass opposite us. It was the last time we oriented ourselves with our eyes.

Achugar had us close them and tune in to our own architecture, our bodies, before we made our way along the carpeted corridors of power on hands and knees – a blind, furless herd. We did not care that we looked insane. She had made us instant converts to the senses. Even the scientist friend I invited was having fun, though he did worry that Achugar might start in on chakras and past lives. (She did not.)

But as we descended to the lobby, spun through the revolving doors (as many times as we liked) and felt our way in the wind and rain by means of tree

trunks and slippery sidewalk posts, Achugar did encourage us to “not know” and “not name” – compulsions, she suggested, that vision and language were to blame for. But isn't the nose as inclined to know as the eyes? And doesn't language nuance as often as it blunts?

In any case, the performance did open the channels between seeing and sensing, priming us for a synaesthetic response. When, late along, one participant exploring a “wading” pool fell in up to her chin, the arm flung out, the water's splash and the extremity of the situation merged into a single impression.

Though Stephen Petronio's *Like Lazarus Did* is meant to travel, I cannot imagine a better place for it than St Paul's Chapel, which was built in 1766 and ensconced in an old graveyard. The choreographer dedicated this requiem of a dance to his father, who died in January and would have been proud.

The body is always decadent if not exactly decaying in Petronio's work, but *Like Lazarus Did*'s exceptionally intricate and delicate structure accentuated that ripe, sometimes even morbid excess, and the contrast made the dance seem even more ephemeral than dance usually does. Solos erupted on the periphery of unison patterns. Some dancers ranged widely, limbs whipping around the torso, while others lay still. This version of *Like Lazarus Did* was set in the round with the Young People's Chorus of New York City singing angelically from the balcony. Without a proscenium to direct the gaze, wherever you looked you caught one thing and missed another, sparking a longing that was its own low-grade kind of mourning.

The chapel was so steamy that people were using their programmes as fans. But they watched intently, electrified in the heat.

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River to River ends this weekend, www.rivertorivernyc.com