



Dance Review: “no plan b” — An Amazing ‘A’ Game

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Aug 31 2017

no plan b, created and directed by Alison Chase. Immersive media design by Gene Felice. Musical composition by Franz Nicolay. Project management and costume design by Eleanor Kipping. Produced by Alison Chase/Performance in partnership with Gene Felice/CoAction Lab and Nicolay. Performed at Thompson’s Point, Portland, ME, through September 2.



A scene from “no plan b.” Bottom: Sean Langford / Top: Graham Cole. Photo: Holland Haverkamp.

By David Greenham

When you walk into a large white tent and glimpse a stage set along one of its sides, you assume the circus has come to town. The expectation that the space will be transformed into an ethereal, star-filled landscape, in which gravity seems to disappear, does not enter your mind. But that's just what happens in *no plan b*, a movement, light, projection, and sound event which recently received its world premiere at the foot of the Penobscot Narrows Bridge in rural Stockton Springs, Maine. This extraordinary production is the brainchild of a partnership among choreographer and performance artist Alison Chase, immersive media designer Gene Felice, and composer Franz Nicolay.

Chase's impressive reputation as an innovator in movement started in the 1970s when she co-founded the acclaimed movement collective Pilobolus. Over the years she has been at the center of numerous ground-breaking movement projects. A resident of Maine, she founded Alison Chase/Performance in 2008.

Felice is an assistant professor with the Intermedia and New Media programs at the University of Maine, where he is developing CoAction Lab, a program dedicated to interdisciplinary collaboration. A Maine resident since 2013, he considers himself "a hybrid artist exploring the intersections created by a variety of ever evolving mediums and methods: light, moving images, interactive systems, analog / digital fabrication, sustainable material research, and sculptural installation."

New York-based composer Nicolay is a prolific composer, performer, and producer. His is nothing if not eclectic: he was once rated #1 on the list of best accordion players in *Punk*, and just last year his first book, *The Humorless Ladies of Border Control: Touring the Punk Underground from Belgrade to Ulaanbaatar*, a diary inspired by a tour through Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Mongolia, made the *New York Times* list of best travel books for 2016.

This innovative creative team has put together a 60-minute mind-expanding travelogue: *no plan b* is a journey that toys with transformation: of time, space, the elements, and the serendipity of discovery. The show, from the start, plays with your senses. As the tent turns dark, sounds of crackling and scratching are heard. Dim flashes of light start to streak about; then they begin to pulsate. On the tent's all-white walls and

ceiling the visual effect is disorienting; the illuminations seem to flash across the expanse, darting about like shooting stars. We soon make out that six dancers — each wearing a blotched and dirt-streaked simple leotard — are holding the lights. To me, they looked like figures emerging from some sort of primordial muck — like us, they are discovering the brave new world of the tent.



“no plan b”’s white tent near the Penobscot Narrows bridge in Stockton Springs. Photo: Amie Coffin.

Scene after scene of metamorphosis take place. For example, early on in the piece we and dancers are surrounded by the projection of the interior of a cave. The image is small scale to begin with; then it grows to a normal size. Eventually, the cave becomes overwhelmingly vast, dwarfing the performers — they look like tiny, inconsequential beings. The dancers initially seem willing to explore the cavern, but when it becomes gigantic they lose their nerve and shrink back.

There are scenes that evoke the unknown: one section juxtaposes the angular movements of the performers with a dizzying series of elongated rectangle shapes. In another interlude, smoke is blown into the space; as the mist dissipates it somehow freezes, looking like textured ice patterns on a piece of glass. The dancing on stage meshes with — at times battles against — the projections. The result is a kind of real life virtual reality, both concrete and abstract, and it's always mesmerizing.

Throughout *no plan b* tantalizing sounds sneak in and out. At times they take the form of discordant, non-harmonic pulsing, at other times the music is so rich, lovely, and melodic that you wish you could just close your eyes (ironically, given the visual feast!) and listen.

On their own, the projections and sounds would be fascinating enough, a version of high-tech installation art. But it's the sinuous movement of the performers that's the beating heart of this piece; the dancing is stunningly beautiful. Performers Jessica Bendig, Graham Cole, Ezra Goh, Sean Langford, Jenna Sherman, and Matthew Walfish – all gifted young dance artists – melt in and out of various states of connection and fragmentation.



A scene from "no plan b." Top: Sean Langford Bottom left: Jenna Sherman / Bottom right: Jessica Bendig / Background: Ezra Goh. Photo: Holland Haverkamp.

There are a few moments in *no plan b* when individuals emerge from the collective – such as the gentle, almost pastoral duet in the cave; or the solo moment in which startling, angular sounds seem to pulsate directly through a dancer’s body: the sadistic sonics seem to force a physical reaction, an unavoidable twist or thrust.

But most often the ensemble of six moves together as one. The dancers are so in sync with each other that there are times when it is nearly impossible to tell where one performer ends and the other begins. Chase’s life-long explorations of movement has been dedicated to creating work in which no individual part is more important than the whole. This seamless physical partnership, combined with the other eye-popping visual elements in *no plan b*, generate a one-of-a-kind experience, a thought-provoking journey that jumps with exquisite grace from the meditatively peaceful to the shockingly visceral and back again.

no plan b will be performed in Portland over Labor Day weekend, and then will be available for booking at other locations in the US and around the world. Venues that book music, dance, or multi-media events should take note. Those who are interested in experiencing something completely different should definitely take note as well.

David Greenham is an adjunct professor of Drama at the University of Maine at Augusta, and is the Program Director for the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine. He spent 14 years leading the Theater at Monmouth, and has been a theater artist and arts administrator in Maine for more than 25 years.