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Excuses for Being



Molly Hickok in *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*, by New York's Big Dance Theater.

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Beauty for its own sake may be the *raison d'être* of **Big Dance Theater's** theatre-film-dance hybrid, *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*, which premiered in Lyon, France, in April '09 and enjoyed a critically acclaimed U.S. debut in a 10-day run at the Kitchen in New York City last October. On the heels of a second, month-long French outing, this delicate amalgam of forms heads to the **Fusebox Festival** in Austin April 27–29 and the **International Festival of Art & Ideas** in New Haven, Conn., June 23–26.

Commissioned by the **French Institute Alliance Française**, *Comme Toujours* is the latest offspring of Big Dance co-artistic directors and husband-wife collaborators Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar. Big Dance's finely tuned creations—which take at least a year in gestation—often spring from source materials that are wide open to interpretation. In this case, Parson and Lazar found a sufficiently flexible artistic foothold in the screenplay of a prototypically French Nouveau Vague film shot in Paris in 1962, Agnès Varga's *Cléo From 5 to 7*. Parson and Lazar filmed meticulous reenactments of selected scenes from the movie during the project's development in Lyon.

The seamless wedding of theatre and dance has preoccupied many journalists who covered Parson and Lazar this past year: What is their secret? Here's a couple that has managed to make two of the world's greatest challenges—marriage and art-making—work like a charm for 20-plus years. But in spite of their thriving respective careers as choreographer (Parson) and actor (Lazar), the pair's category-defying

brainchildren have often gone overlooked or under-lauded by dance or theatre purists. Fittingly, *Comme Toujours* is first and foremost a sly meditation on the opposing natures of two media, theatre and film, and the work seamlessly shifts shapes between the two forms over the live event's tightly constructed 90 minutes.

The story centers on Cléo, a beautiful B-list singer with diva-sized baggage (played by founding company member Molly Hickok), and unfolds during two telling hours of her life as she, waxing tragical, awaits the results of a suspicious biopsy and emerges transformed from the nail-biting, naval-gazing experience.

In one mirror-mirror moment, Cléo utters to herself: "To be ugly, that is what Death is.... As long as I am beautiful, I am 10 times more alive than the others." On a philosophical level, the play weighs the "unplugged" (and therefore potentially ugly) nature of theatre against the artifice of film. Through her confrontation with mortality, Cléo learns to sublimate ego to art and authentic human interaction. The bustling play ends on a quiet note as she and a mystery man discuss love. They sit on an empty stage before a projection of swaying maple trees in leaf, and all the nonsense seems to fade away.

In the work of Big Dance Theater, as in so many French films, plot ultimately takes a backseat to feeling. The company might identify with composer Louis Vierne, who once said, "*Je n'ai eu qu'un seul but: émoi*—I have only ever had one goal, and that is to move."

—Cassandra Csencsitz