

## Italy's Kilowatt Festival: dancing an 'ethic of living'

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Detail from Piero della Francesca's "Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels"

In the hometown of Renaissance painter **Piero della Francesca**, the Tuscan *borgo* of Sansepolcro, the **Kilowatt Festival**, in its 20th year, examines how contemporary performance can foster "urban regeneration." This year's theme, "Excess of Reality," entrusts performance with reformulating "a forgotten ethic of living." The stakes are high—as they should. Although some established artists seemed disappointingly too self-referential, three emerging Italian choreographers of international standing, Marco Augusto Chenevier, Sofia Nappi, and Claudia Caldarano, along with their remarkable performers, incisively tackled the Festival's theme, reigniting civil force into performance. I believe their works, with their varying aesthetics and trajectories, would capture the interest of American audiences too.



*un solo respiro, augusto chenevier. photo: luca del pia*

With a jump and a run from the public gardens (Giardini di Piero) to an old building (Circolo delle Stanze) in the heart of

Sansepolcro, **Augusto Chenevier's** *Un solo respiro* (*One Breath*) drags an intimate group of seven audience members into a different temporal and emotional world to recount the origination of the local tradition of crochet lacing. Throughout each room of the building, the Paris-based Italian choreographer and her dancers Océane Delbrel and Alessia Pinto, unfold the sisterhood interweaving the lives of local women who gave refuge to a Flemish woman. Banned from her country because pregnant, she taught them the art of crochet as an act of gratitude. Chenevier's compositional and gestural economy - (remarkably performed by Delbrel's technical specificity and tenderness), where the shift of a chair can mark a sudden turn of events, bestows solemnity to the story and fills the otherwise stark rooms with a dramatic aura. *Un solo respiro* succeeds in leaving us with a trust in solidarity and mutual support -- a project much needed in times when women's bodies are the locus of radical social divisions.



*wabi-sabi*, chor sofia nappi. photo: luca del pia

The choreographer's own injury spurred **Sofia Nappi** to adapt her trio, *Wabi-Sabi*, into a duet for two magnificent performers, Adriano Popolo Rubbio and Paolo Piancastelli. The title's Zen Buddhist concept refers to thriving through the beauty of imperfection. And, if the choreography wants to show that, it succeeded, even if there's little-to-no imperfection to Popolo Rubbio's and Piancastelli's dancing. Their complicity (without the forced intimacy of so many post-pandemic choreographies) lies in their growing exchange of energy and constant commitment to skillfulness, performed with contagious enjoyment. This is perhaps *Wabi-Sabi's* energizing ethics of living. While it's undeniable that Nappi's movement and atmosphere reference Hofesh Shechter and Gaga, this aesthetic choice turns out to be dramaturgically on point to manifest an irresistible vitalism, with astute compositional choices that reveal her original choreographic aptitude and show how to fashion global aesthetics in generative ways.



*riflessioni: claudia caldarano, dancer maurizio giunti, photo: luca del pia*

Finally, in *Riflessioni*, the interdisciplinary artist **Claudia Calderano** tackles the festival's theme with intellectual finesse and compositional wit, by asking what role bodies play in our constructions, misconstructions, and deformations of reality. The set is minimal: a distorting mirroring surface and background in a deconsecrated church (Auditorium Santa Chiara). Here, Calderano, in a total-black outfit, with peremptory gestures, manipulates and shifts across the space the naked body of Maurizio Giunti. While, at first, we are captured by the docility of Giunti as pure matter, we soon realize how the distorted reflections of his body, which continuously splinters and unexpectedly recomposes, alter the authority of Calderano's creative act, unveiling its neurotic impulses -- and hypnotizing our perception. At the end, a black cloth covers the mirror and Calderano's body, which, in an ultimate game of inversion, crawling around the space, becomes the invisible seat for the quiet, unpretentious parade of Giunti's bareness. This is probably the most convincing statement about an anti-authoritarian ethic of living at Kilowatt Festival.

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**Melissa Melpignano** (PhD, UCLA) is a dance scholar, writer, and performer. A recipient of the Selma Jeanne Cohen Award for dance research, she works as an Assistant Professor of Instruction and Director of Dance at The University of Texas at El Paso. Her writings appear in *The Dancer-Citizen*, *Dance Research Journal*, *AJS Perspectives*, *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, among others.





To take a summer break in New York (as I am) in August, when dance is mostly happening at bucolic out-of-town festivals, and to run into the prodigious choreographer **Kyle Abraham**'s newest work for his Cadillac of a dance company, **Abraham in Motion (A.I.M.)** — the New York City premiere of *Requiem: Fire in the Air of the Earth* — is to luck out.

The 70-minute, intermission-less work, a commission by Lincoln Center's **Summer for the City** presentation series, has at its core Abraham's ever-evolving movement invention, a pithy feast for choreography junkies, a banquet beyond any single viewing's capacity to imbibe. But it was also a feast for all the senses, insofar as the movement-driven dance maker shows increasing sophistication in employing other theatrical elements to enhance his work. In the case of "Requiem," it's Dan Scully's gorgeous set and lighting design that wraps the dancers in hues of yellow, green, red. And it's the edgy live music-mix by electronic-guy **Jlin** that sets the room thumping. In other words, Abraham, who first emerged as a dance-world *wunderkind* circa 2010 is making good on the many grants and awards that gave early recognition to his precocious skills — even crowning him with a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award.

Guess what? I think "Requiem" is a work of genius. Its vulnerabilities exist — primarily in a kind of chutzpah in using Mozart's magisterial, elegiac music, then, scrambling it into aural wallpaper. Just because you can, perhaps you shouldn't.

But the dancing. Unleashing his seamless movement chains, Abraham transports his street-dance and modern-dance roots to a higher plane. Then, the unexpected interpolation of ballet enchainment, this from a guy who lately stages works on The Royal and New York City Ballet. His splendid ten-member troupe, with seaming ease, transitions between funky, jittery, dance-waves, as they lift arms high, clasp hands like an overhead lasso, and undulate their torsos. Then they plop to the ground and pirouette on their knees. Even with the use of ballet, it's all so pleasingly slithery and non-positional. I loved the humor in the witty little gestural conversations that found their way in, kind of like "losing it," toward the ending. Hilarious.

But "broken," not hilarious, is a key word for "Requiem." The dance finds dancers in various stages of collapse, and they are dressed in a way that at times evokes ragamuffins, at others, noble warriors of the Middle Ages. It looks and feels post-Pandemic (and ...why wouldn't it) insofar as: Who are these people? What are they doing? Why are they doing it? Several men wear skirts, others wear baggy sacks, another dons what looks like a paper-mache tutu.

The evening's centerpiece is a lengthy, nonstop montage powered by Jlin's harrowingly throbbing electronic sound that morphs into African beat; the dance goes commensurately tribal. To a clanging, percussive sound, somewhat screechy, Abraham stages moves that crackle like Rice Krispies in milk and percolate like your mother's plug-in electric coffee maker. The synthesis of dance with sound and light in this section I found it utterly thrilling to watch.

There are chapters. One changeover is as abrupt as switching from one Netflix movie to another. At a certain point, the work switches to silence, and thereafter it goes somewhat downhill. Endings are hard, especially when you have pumped up the volume that loud. (Jack Cole was notorious for not finishing his works and letting his dancers get themselves off stage.) Abraham overly relies on certain clichés, like the collapsed figure gaining support from the rest of the posse. But one early such image, that of a slender female dancer, in collapse, with caring colleagues coming to her rescue, evoked for me Anne Heche's horrifying end, and the outpouring of concern for whatever agony drove her to it. I don't remotely suggest Abraham operates that literally. But the association was there for me.

Speaking of happy endings, the night I attended "Requiem" was Kyle Abraham's birthday. The stylish choreographer, in a blue caftan, got a round of Stevie Wonder's bubbly version of Happy Birthday — and he danced on stage to it, taking broad, wide steps, feeling the joy.

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Dance critic **Debra Levine** is founder/editor/publisher of arts•meme.