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Snow birds

Performance piece offers a wintry view of isolation

By Felicia Feaster

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The performance piece *As If Traveling Through Snow* at Atlanta's Ballroom Studios is an unusual meditation on the often opposing urge for individual expression and the pleasures of human connection.

A savvy blend of dance, music and spoken word featuring Rajni Shah and Jill Sullivan, the show originated with what the performers describe as an immediate connection that developed when the pair met at Carrie Heller Circus Arts Camp. Shah, who calls herself a "self-trained performance artist" and Sullivan, a dancer, felt an instantaneous chemistry when they performed an improv together, and decided to work that bond into the performance *As If Traveling Through Snow* at the Ballroom Studios.

Testament to the energy between the two performers, the best sequence in the preview performance was a pas de deux between Sullivan and Shah, charmingly performed in jeans and T-shirts, which allowed the lyrical and the ordinary to collide. That union between the two dancers was all the more pleasurable considering the bulk of the show, about the metaphorical walls erected between people. It's a psychological distance emphasized as each dancer performs on separate sides of the Ballroom space, which gives the performance an unusual "split-screen" effect. A performance more about creating a sensual ambient emotional experience than

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Todd Carroll

Jill Sullivan (top) and Rajni Shah in *As If Traveling Through Snow*

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sustaining a narrative thread, the most lasting impression is of the human struggle to connect with the world and one another within the straitjacket of one's subjectivity.

As If Traveling Through Snow opens as each performer responds to an equally frustrating physical environment that becomes a kind of metaphor for life's comparable struggles. Sullivan works on her side of the performance space to unspool a string of white Christmas lights and Shah is equally foiled in her actions as she crawls, bundled in heavy snowsuit and boots, through a trail of crumpled newspaper. When they switch sides, the women's response to their environment also shifts: Shah draping herself with and playfully entangling herself in the lights while Sullivan sweeps up and aggressively orders the clutter of newspaper. The performance thus shifts to become a telling "dance" of unique responses to shared circumstance. Such divergent experiences are also nicely echoed in the physical appearance of the women, Shah, exotic and dark-haired with a tendency to smile broadly, and Sullivan, blonde and fair with a more troubled, brooding expression.

Such impediments to one's progress and the distance between these characters as they dance and move on separate sides of the space are issues returned to again and again in the show. One of the cleverest elements of the production is how Shah has tried to implicate spectators in that sensation of distance, by splitting her audience into two sides of the performance space, and through a more subtle distancing achieved via sound. Each member of the audience wears a separate pair of headphones hooked up to a unique Walkman soundtrack that at times corresponds with the actions on stage and at other times creates an ambient soundtrack. The device of isolating each viewer in a separate wall of sound not only parallels the isolation of Sullivan and Shah on stage, it also provocatively shatters the usual communal experience of theater, cutting individuals off from each other.

Such inspired conceptual touches make *As If Traveling Through Snow* a welcome, idiosyncratic instance of a kind of experimental performance art rarely encountered on the local scene. *As If* may also signal the initial baby steps in a promising local collaboration between the business sphere and the arts. Funding for the performance comes from the Leonardo Foundation's Christopher Mangum, whose company, the Venture X Group, advises high-tech start-ups. Mangum, who is also a musician and artist when he's not trapped within his "staid, conservative business world," sees a parallel between the arts and the business world and the need in both to act upon ideas and inspiration, noting "every idea you have could be genius."

As If Traveling Through Snow at the *Ballroom Studios*, 107 Luckie St. second floor, runs Nov. 30-Dec. 2 at 8 p.m. and Dec. 3 at 5 p.m. Tickets are \$10, \$5 for students. 404-978-1262 x5659. www.ballroomstudios.com