

# ESSAY

## **Walking in Their Shoes: Art and Work in Pat Graney's *Faith Triptych* by Jeanmarie Higgins, Cornish College of the Arts**

In the final moments of *Faith*, six dancers wearing red high heels walk toward the audience, remove their shoes, line them up in a row downstage, then turn their backs to us and exit. The shoes remain. "Here," the dancers seem to say, "see if you have any better luck with these." The difficulty of walking in shoes—from toe shoes to street shoes to spike heels—is a problem the dancers work to solve throughout *Faith Triptych*. Shoes are just as mysterious as they are everyday in Pat Graney's work, they are at once ordinary and extraordinary. They stabilize us, mediating between our feet and the earth. They communicate information about us—our social status, our occupations, our genders. Shoes change our heights and our walks, dictating where we can and cannot go.

In Graney's later work, shoes haunt. In the 2008 dance theatre piece, *House of Mind*, a room is filled with hundreds of gold-painted shoes. The effect is chilling, each pair of shoes standing in for a person who once wore them. Like the dancers in *Faith Triptych*, *House of Mind*'s dancers all wear high heels, at times looking as if they are impersonating their mothers and grandmothers. Their heels are metronomes, keeping time for the dancers' movement. They are timepieces, their rhythmic clicking mimicking the ticking of a clock. Walking in someone else's shoes: in other Graney pieces, this becomes a sort of dancing empathy, a kinetic way to remember. In her most recent "Keeping the Faith" Prison Project, an ensemble of inmates at the Washington Corrections Center for Women begins a performance by reconstructing Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video, marking the passing of a personal icon by copying the steps he created, the women moving as one.

Like many of her scenic and costume choices, the shoes that hobble *Faith Triptych*'s dancers also give them life. Shoes are sometimes the key to playing, solving problems, even worshipping. Dancers "catch the spirit:" a teenaged girl, possessed by her high heeled Mary Janes, dances in confused joy at the new and unfamiliar workings of her body; a woman in a crowded ladies room steals cigarettes from her fellow mirror-gazers, then, as if controlled by her high-heeled shoes, dances ecstatically in celebration.

If you are a dancer, tape goes hand in hand with your shoes. In the first solo section of *Faith*, a woman pulls a roll of tape out of a pair of red high heels. She tapes her feet as if she is preparing to perform ballet, puts the heels on, and hobble-walks offstage. Later, toward the end of *Sleep*, this everyday action is transformed, escalating into the absurd sight of a different dancer taping her entire body. A woman in high heels and underclothes carefully places a small piece of black tape on her bare thigh. She tapes faster and faster until she is no longer merely placing pieces of tape on her body, but wrapping herself up until she has made a girdle. Her body bound, she puts on her black dress. She takes the action one step farther as she tapes her mouth shut. The effect is both terrifying and hilarious.

Much of Graney's work rests on this kind of emotional contradiction. Seemingly opposed thoughts are actually necessary parts of the same idea, and objects always have more than one use. *Faith Triptych*'s *Sleep* clearly illustrates this. *Sleep* opens with a little girl carrying a birthday cake with candles lit. She blows them out, then walks upstage and goes to sleep underneath a white sheet that covers the whole stage. The dance is like a dream of her future, and she dreams in dresses—a birthday dress, a red dress, a nightdress, a wedding dress. A bride is married, and it rains a steady storm of white. In the next moment, the bride is buried, the other women gathering up the white rain as if it has been transformed

into earth. They pour it over her. After the burial, the wedding dance. The women throw the white earth into the air in joyous gestures of celebration. This one prop that rains down on the little girl's dream of a life is rain, hail, earth and grain, as it marks occasions of life and death alike—a birthday, a wedding, a funeral, a harvest.

As *Faith Triptych* progresses, images of shoes and tape accumulate, as do questions about their significance. Are bound feet and bodies symbols of the ways a dancer's art form oppresses and polices her body? Or do these images poke fun at the very idea of oppression, the taped-up women's bodies making the performers move in ways usually reserved for the most skilled of escape artists? The same double meanings begin to accumulate with entire scenes in *Faith Triptych*. Scenes in one dance ghost scenes from others, pointing to the multiple meanings of objects. Are those candles birthday candles or funeral candles? Are those women lined up at a long table partaking in a wedding supper? Or are they applying lipstick in a ladies room mirror? Or maybe it's a gender-bending tableau of "The Last Supper." The scene holds all of these meanings, as is true in many Pat Graney pieces, where art and life work side by side to mark occasions of joy and sadness, living and dying.

**ON THE  
BOARDS**