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DANCE

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Romance Has Its Ups and Downs, And So Does This Unlikely Stage

By GIA KOURLAS

FINDING the entrance of Autumn Bowl, an indoor pit for skateboarders tucked inside an industrial factory on the Brooklyn waterfront, is a bit harrowing — especially at 7 a.m., when the streets are deserted and the air is still dusty with particles from the fire last month that destroyed part of the neighboring Terminal Market Building in Greenpoint. “Kids go in there,” said a man standing next to his truck and gesturing to a metal doorway. His friend uttered the three ominous words “Don’t go alone” and offered to escort me inside.

As we walked along a long, dark corridor, my guide, brandishing a pocket flashlight, offered another warning. “There are rats; suddenly, one might come at you from behind,” he said, quickly glancing around while making shuffling noises with his feet.

But entering the bowl itself, behind another secret door and up a steep stairway, was like stumbling onto Frances Hodgson Burnett’s secret garden. The cavernous pit, which dips and curves like a smooth wooden salad bowl, is a shocking yet unusually beautiful sight. For three nights, beginning this Thursday, it will be the setting for Layla Childs and Sonya Robbins’s newest dance.

Ms. Robbins, who along with Ms. Childs directs the group robbinschilds, first saw the space at a party last summer. “There were multiple people skating: somebody would drop in and skate around, and as soon as they lifted out, someone else would drop in,” Ms. Robbins said. “It was raucous. There was a thrash band playing, and I was so energized.”

In the new piece, “Seriously Heavy (i hurt myself hurting you),” Ms. Childs, 34, and Ms. Robbins, 31, explore states of heartache and rejection, which both said they had recently endured. Their original idea was to construct a large dune set with wood and carpet.

“Usually, Layla and I fantasize about an environment that we love to interpret,” Ms. Robbins said. “We wanted to have a rolling, uneven topography to dance on, and initially we were going to build that up. But after I saw the bowl —”

“She said, ‘Hey, hey, hey, how about instead of going up, we go down?’” Ms. Childs interrupted. “And then our emotional private lives took a turn for the worse.”

“A major nose dive,” Ms. Robbins agreed. “And it all made sense.” But while a miserable breakup for Ms. Robbins and her boyfriend, and a rocky patch for

Ms. Childs and her girlfriend, may have inspired the work’s dark mood, it is the subterranean setting that matters most to each.

In “Seriously Heavy,” the two choreographers, along with the dancers Rebecca Brooks, Michael Helland and Rachael Faulkner, are physically and figuratively trapped in a pit. In a subtle sense, there is a dark-comedy aspect to the work: imprisoned by the pitched contours of a bowl, the body is engaged in an impossible struggle to find balance and, ultimately, some inner poise.

Love is a battlefield, and the dancers in “Seriously Heavy” are at a disadvantage from the start. Their war is waged on uneven ground. “When we set out to make the piece, the emotional layer wasn’t determined,” Ms. Childs said. “It was really an abstract spatial relationship that we were attracted to: the topography or the sunkenness of the space. We responded to that physically, and as we started developing ideas for how to be in that space, the emotional landscapes that we were going through were undeniable. It’s not meant to be a portrayal of our direct relationships whatsoever. It’s love, it’s struggle, and it doesn’t even have to be about a person.”

Transferring movement from the studio to the sloping architecture of the space posed practical difficulties, even though the choreography is purposely raw. The choreographers have given up a degree of control. “We’re going to have to get to a point where we’re comfortable having a lot of uncertainty in parts of the performance because you can’t anticipate all of the contours of the space, or where you might tumble and fall,” Ms. Robbins said. “Traditionally, our work is very rehearsed and clean.”

Rehearsal time in the bowl is limited to early mornings (the dancers generally start around 7) and has largely consisted of transferring movement they have created in the flat surface of the studio to the uneven terrain of the bowl. “It’s definitely different to how we’re all accustomed to working as dancers,” Ms. Robbins explained. “We don’t have time to warm up and take care of our bodies, and if a skater comes, we have to stop. I feel this crazy, heightened sense of panic whenever I hear anyone walking through the gate. So it gives this urgency to our rehearsals that happen here.”

Ms. Childs and Ms. Robbins met at Bard College, where they both studied dance composition. While Ms. Childs grew up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and was briefly a student at the School of American Ballet (just long enough to appear as a soldier and an angel in “The Nutcracker”), Ms. Rob-

bins, from San Francisco, had no early dance training. They formed robbinschilds in 2003 and have since collaborated on two other works, “Broque” and “Half Space.”

Unlike other set-heavy works by the choreographers, who are intrigued by the meeting of performance and installation, “Seriously Heavy” brings little into the space except for a pair of vintage swivel chairs shaped like hands, hair dryers attached to microphones, and risers built for the occasion. The performers will wear black moccasins and, except for Mr. Helland, velour jumpsuits in solid colors. “Michael will wear a coverall,” Ms. Robbins explained. “It’s hard for the man in a velour jumpsuit.”

“We’ve tried, believe us,” Ms. Childs said. “Costumes are very important to us, but we gave up because of all the splinters. We decided that velour jumpsuits are very functional and also a little sexy. In the end, this piece is about adapting to the space.”

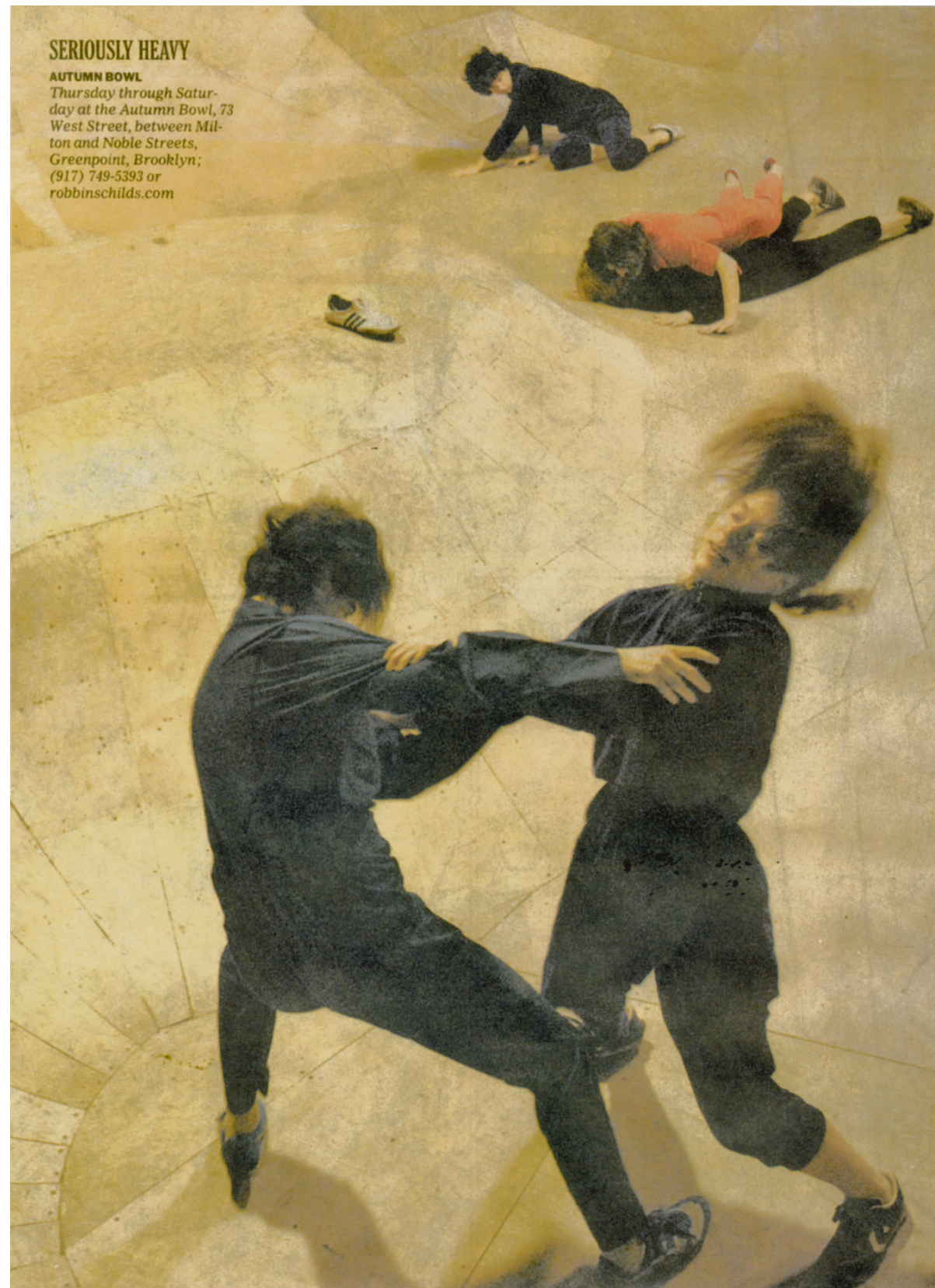
They began conceptualizing and creating movement for the production several months before they were actually granted permission to perform in the bowl. Last fall, Ms. Childs and Ms. Robbins initiated what they call “a courtship” with Dave Mims, one of the managers of the space. The bowl is run as a collective; once skaters pay a fee and sign a waiver, they are considered members and given keys.

“Those skaters are a different breed,” Ms. Childs said. “We’re weird dancers, and they’re weird skaters. It was a funny meeting ground, and there’s a lot of mutual respect. Dancers and skaters do what they do because it gives us a certain feeling. Dave was very open to the project. He didn’t balk when we first approached him: noncommittal, but incredibly open.”

By March, they had signed an agreement with Mr. Mims and were given keys of their own. Starting on Tuesday, they will build a riser — fast — with the assistance of the set designer AJ Blandford, their frequent collaborator.

“In an ideal fantasy, we would have had a residency for two months and six hours a day to work in the bowl, but this isn’t that piece,” Ms. Childs said with a shrug. “We had to go with the flow. But we’ve given up some control. It won’t be slick, and that’s why we like it.”

One priority, however, is to scour the grimy restroom. “It probably won’t look that different, but just so everyone knows, we’re going to clean it,” Ms. Childs added. “And stock it with toilet paper. You know — as a real luxury.”



Dancers of robbinschilds rehearsing “Seriously Heavy (i hurt myself hurting you)” at the Autumn Bowl in Brooklyn. (Photo by Nan Melville for The New York Times)

SERIOUSLY HEAVY

AUTUMN BOWL
Thursday through Saturday at the Autumn Bowl, 73 West Street, between Milton and Noble Streets, Greenpoint, Brooklyn; (917) 749-5393 or robbinschilds.com