



J E A N N E R U D D Y  
D A N C E

**Talons and clown masks in Martha Clarke's *Sandman*.**

by Lisa Kraus for Dance Magazine—May 7th, 2009

Picture a woman in a filthy shift, hair stringy, with extended claws for feet, lifting her talons slowly one at a time. Or a figure wearing a distorted clown mask, slumped against a brick wall, who rises to stroll around with a hand-held fog machine. In the premiere of *Sandman*, commissioned and performed by Jeanne Ruddy Dance, Martha Clarke offers one after another similarly enigmatic image.

With its prevailing tone of menace, the work's action is distributed throughout the industrial chic garage-turned-theater. Six performers linger in dark corners, scuttle around as voyeurs, or enter into whimsical or violent dreamscapes. They pop up from behind or slither off the stage platform.

In a repeating Jack-the-Ripper-like sequence, a masked man rough handles a woman and then drags away her inert body. Arthur Solari's soundscore clinches the narrative; we hear something (a body?) being dumped into water. Thunder and thuds roil the space. Birdcalls accompany the chicken-footed woman's straightening of her straw nest. But there's light-heartedness too, like the butterfly on a fish-line that magically alights on a woman's hand.

The structural backbone of *Sandman* is its clear scene-shifts and full ensemble moments—one a whirling vortex of all the players, and the other a child's chasing game. Otherwise *Sandman* is a seemingly random display of disconnected though sometimes recurring images.

After the applause it remains unclear how the work adds up. Sleuthing reveals that the bulbous masks, chicken appendages, and asylum-like garb relate to themes in the photographs of Diane Arbus and Ralph Meatyard, credited as the loose inspiration for *Sandman*. Clarke has turned two-dimensional art into live performance in the past with phenomenal results (like *Garden of Earthly Delights* and *Vienna: Lusthaus*). This work is at present only a study: highly promising, but for now without cohesion.

In most seasons, Jeanne Ruddy Dance presents a commission by a renowned guest choreographer and a new work by former Graham principal Ruddy, the company's founder. Her *Lark* (2009) deploys five dancers in satiny grey frocks and vests to Ellen Fishman-Johnson's original interpretation of Haydn's *The Lark* string quartet. Snatches of Haydn float through the breathy-sounding, synthesized score.

The suite of dances focuses on varieties of human interaction. Opening with nods to courtly demeanor, the formally arrayed quintet plays with flourishes of the wrist and fouetté-like placing of the feet. A choreographic jumble ensues as ballet inferences yield to heroic, angular jumps and square dance-y flinging of skirts. A jerky doll-like trio recalls Coppélia with added vaudevillian riffs and eye-rolling. A moment of Irish dance footwork alludes to Haydn's use of a hornpipe. *Lark* ends with a dramatic double lift as two women raised over their partners' heads reach upwards. Here is the light that counters the dark of Clarke's work.

Now in its ninth season, the company looks mature and polished. Production values are high; Peter J. Jakubowski's backlighting of the upstage scrim for *Lark* is particularly effective.