

All The Things You Are: JRJP in Rhode Island

by Al Basile (poet, singer-songwriter, cornetist) © 2010

At the outset of the Jump Rhythm Quartet performance, Billy Siegenfeld comes out like the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and speaks to the audience – but not merely to beg our attention. He wants more; and showing us immediately that he can see us, complacent in our seats, just as well as we can see him, he mimics our blank expressions, and exhorts us to sit up, lean forward, and attend to the important first element: rhythm. Within minutes he has us moving, laughing, singing, clapping – our first lesson in the vocabulary of his language, which uses the body, face, breath, and voice to show us his version of what it is to be human and alive.

It's twenty years now since Billy started the Jump Rhythm Jazz Project. His vision jumps the fences of the art form and encourages other dancers to join him in the open country where you shout and scat for joy, sing to show closeness, make a face when you're hurt, use everything you have to proclaim yourself in the world. The four dancer-singer-actors of the Jump Rhythm Quartet showed what Jump Rhythm Technique – the grammar underlying their performances – will do if embraced and mastered: let performers be more fully themselves as humans – individuals in a group context. It gives them back their faces, voices, breath, and bodies as tools in the service of art.

Just as there are some singers who make us feel that we know them after hearing them sing a song, others make us know that we have heard a magnificent vocal performance yet hold us apart by hiding behind the screen of their voices. Jump Rhythm's members are free to make us feel we know them as people. It's partly the freedom Kevin Durnbaugh has to perform his solo rhythm based rap, which he wrote himself, and partly the unique performance skills he brings to its realization onstage. It's partly the youth, energy, and freshness that Jordan Kahl brings as well as her seamless expression of emotion in face, voice, and body, which convinces us that she feels first and shows it naturally – the opposite of someone putting on a face to show emotion. Brandi Coleman is called on to show a range from haughtiness, sass, strength, and humor all the way to the delicious banked fires of tenderness in old age of *Poppy and Lou* in the moment near the end of that piece when she pauses for a moment in her dance with Billy and looks offstage left for a moment, hearing the call of death which will finally separate them in an utterly specific and concrete way from the couple's dance of life which has gone before. She conveys the power of the great acting that happened in silent film.

Which leaves us where we began – with Billy Siegenfeld. He sings “Bye Bye Blackbird” to the audience sitting on a chair, stomping on the floorboards and turning his breath and body into a drum. In *Why Gershwin?* he first flails like a crazed rocker to James Brown's “Payback” then, chastened, sings an unabashed paean to romantic love to “S Wonderful.” In *Poppy and Lou* he stares off leaden-eyed after the love of his life leaves, an old man alone, engulfed in loss. He's taken his early training as a drummer, his role as Og the Leprechaun in *Finian's Rainbow*, his first college efforts at Broadway style choreography, his love of jazz, swing, blues, soul and funk, his years with dance companies built on the vision of others, his love of sports, and most important his love of and understanding of life and the human journey, and come up with a way to hold all that up for us to see. What's more, he's accepted the much greater task of inviting others to learn and grow from his decidedly human approach to making dances. And he's kept it all together before the public for twenty years now – a public that can't know before they attend their first performance how different it is. A dance concert, yes – but more natural.

Billy Siegenfeld has turned himself inside out, as all artists do, and lets us see the world through him. Jump Rhythm's pieces are like plays in that they show us human character in cooperation and conflict; but unlike them they feature humans acting in situations which inspire emotions, who are free to be themselves showing those emotions. The results are universal: we recognize the feelings – of joy, friendship, alienation, mistrust, loss – from our own lives, and see them expressed in sound and movement onstage by people who remain unique. If good art lets us see something new, and great art lets us see in a new way, then Billy and his pals cavort in the latter category. See them and feel restored.