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SARAH MICHELSON TEAMS UP WITH RICHARD MAXWELL FOR *DEVOTION* Bible + Sports = Odd Paradise

By Deborah Jowitt

Sarah Michelson is an artist you can trust, even if you're not exactly sure what she's doing. She's brilliant at making apparently simple things bristle with half-hidden complexities and reducing complications to their essence. She puts ideas together onstage in ways that most choreographers wouldn't have thought of. Her work can thrill you even when it's making you uncomfortable—a risk she's willing to take.

Devotion, unusually for her, is based on a text—one by Richard Maxwell, artistic director of New York City Players. Seated behind the audience at the Kitchen, Michelson intermittently reads in a calm, clear voice his poetic descriptions of paradises, of life's beginnings, of decisions—all freighted with personal memories. There are biblical references ("Eve gives the secret of the world to Mary while Mary sleeps").

Michelson typically reconfigures the architecture of performance spaces. We sit in three rows along what's usually a side wall of the Kitchen, and the big entrance doors to the lobby provide the performers' only entrance and exit. Two "chandeliers" of huge lamps hang from the ceiling, and a pole with more clustered at the bottom stands down center (lighting by Michelson and Zack Tinkelman). On the wall to our left hang three portraits by TM Davy: Michelson in a red dress, flanked by Maxwell (holding papers and with a guitar). A smaller head portrait of her hangs above them. In front of us is an image of her seated; a kneeling man draped in white cloth has his head in her lap. The artworks—luminous on black backgrounds—evoke 17th-century paintings.

This gallery atmosphere is affirmed in the choreography. Michelson breaks movement phrases into strings of forcefully struck positions, sometimes linked by passages of running. Even a leap has little visible preparation, and the landing is held. The style of *Devotion* also alludes to sporting events, as do the wonderful costumes and footwear in combinations of red, white, and black by James Kidd, Shaina Mote, and Michelson.

The program lists roles that include Mary, Jesus, Adam, and Eve. But Michelson's biblical references are cryptic, surfacing almost invisibly in what amounts to a two-hour

marathon (a fitness coach and massage therapist, Sulyn Silbar, is mentioned in the credits). The amazing solo performed by Rebecca Warner (billed as "Narrator") is a feat of endurance and devotion. Again and again, she strikes a deep, wide-legged version of a ballet's fourth position, her body bent, her arms reaching forward for something. She lunges, holding both arms out in cruciform shape and tilts until one of them touches the ground. Running, spinning, occasionally skipping between poses, she sets the thematic vocabulary and the business-like tone. Sometimes Nicole Mannarino ("Spirit of Religion") joins her briefly and races out again.

When Non Griffiths (Mary) enters, the lights change drastically, beaming in from beyond the open door. Griffiths, who lives in Wales, appeared in Michelson's 2007 *Dover Beach*. She's 14 now, but—dressed in white and small and slim as a sapling—she looks more like an 11-year-old. Her solo is also rigorous; she's constantly switching directions, stepping out on stiff legs, thrusting her pelvis forward at times, hitting everything with full force and clarity. As she dances, the vibrating, exalting clamor of Philip Glass's *Dance IX* bursts out. What virgin could resist the Holy Ghost with that going on? The duet between Griffiths and James Tyson (Jesus) is mostly a matter of subtly related paths—often a light three-step pattern running forward or backward in curves. They rarely touch, but he often joins her, copies her moves, and both of them remain, posed lying on the floor, while Warner and Mannarino dance in unison, wearing smashing striped outfits.

The duet for Jim Fletcher (Adam) of New York City Players—a big man—and dancer extraordinaire Eleanor Hulihan (Eve) also has the focused energy of a deconstructed Olympics, but their relationship differs, and the music by Pete Drungle is rich, somehow noble. Under the glare from a rack of 12 lights in the doorway (flanked by two "prophets") and a chandelier now swinging in wide arcs, Hulihan, arms pumping, runs in and out countless times, encountering Fletcher briefly on each foray. Sometimes she falls backward and he catches her. Sometimes she leaps into his arms or braces herself against him and thrusts a leg high. She seems to keep inviting him to exit with her, but for a long time, he can't cross the threshold. Finally they leave hand in hand, and Warner returns in navy blue to recap her moves to guitar music and words telling of one person's kind of paradise on earth. How does it end? "We'll be ourselves . . . we are the story. . . ." Eden is here for the discovering. As she exits, she turns and touches the floor in homage.