

THE PHOENIX

The Hometown Newspaper of Brownstone Brooklyn

Vol. XXIII, No. 20
November 15, 1993

Through Nov. 22, 1993

On the Waterfront: Red Hook Style

BY TOM MCKNIGHT

With the harbour stretching out calm and gray beyond them, visitors gathered on the shores of Red Hook over the Nov. 6-7 weekend to be part of "On the Waterfront," a combination walking tour and art event which was designed to connect the past and the present of this historic community, interpreted through dance, theater and music.

Visitors were both audience and part of the stage set as a walking tour of historic warehouses and homes was followed by a performance of dance and song at the Beard Street Pier. Conceived by choreographer Martha Bowers of Dancing in the Streets, in collaboration with Red Hook Arts and Dance/Theatre/Etcetera, this event focused on the thriving past of this Brooklyn waterfront and its usually stark present state. But there was nothing stark about this weekend, as Red Hook came to life in sight and sound.

The tour wound its way through cobblestoned streets along the waterfront from Pier 41 south to Beard Street. Led by Sue Peebles and fourth-generation Red Hookian Barbara Ross, visitors passed remnants of a working waterfront and rows of old homes, including Ms. Peebles' own house built in the early 1800's.

The guides told tales of long-lost relatives who "jumped ship" in Red Hook for a new life and those on the tour followed such a path, having traveled from far and near to arrive at this waterfront and follow a path to the ancient warehouses. Ms. Ross' great grandfather had once come to this waterfront to work. On this day visitors came to see work expressed through dance.

NOW KNOWN FOR THEIR ART

The warehouses on the Beard Street pier are great fortresses of stone, with peaked ceilings reaching stunning heights. Thanks to developer Greg O'Connell, who reopened the site after years of abandonment, the spaces have recently come to be known as the site of art exhibits and performances as he rehabilitates them for new uses.

A musical troupe led by composer and percussionist David Pleasant welcomed guests to the pier with strange blues and haphazard ragtime. The music moaned and cried, the musicians kept time like a machine on the brink of mayhem, expressing the many sounds of the old waterfront and foreshadowing its eventual deterioration.

Dancers dressed in the tattered attire of weary immigrants appeared for a piece entitled "With What You Could Carry," a somewhat somber welcome to the New World. At the close of the piece, the women held swaddled newborns in their arms like a quiet wish for the future. The men embraced their wives and children like protectors of a dream to live and work on what was then the bustling Red Hook waterfront.

The band became the new guides, leading visitors in a procession to a trolley museum



Above, Dorothy Randall Grey with the "Ocean of Possibilities" students from P.S. 15. Left, weary immigrants danced with solemn hope in "With What You Could Carry." Below, David Pleasant and friends brought blues and body percussion with the spirit of New Orleans to the old docks of Red Hook. (Phoenix/Robert Wright Photos)



housed at the Beard Street pier. Students of Red Hook's own P.S. 15 performed "An Ocean of Possibilities" from inside a trolley car that rocked and swayed under their dancing feet, exemplifying what Ms. Bowers calls "the strong spirit that remains alive" in Red Hook. The students sang about their futures, about being young, reminding us that "we've

all been that way!" They expressed a need for appreciation and an excitement in the prospects that lie ahead.

This song of youth was followed by words and song from seniors from the Red Hook Senior Citizen's Center in a selection called "I Have Been Here." An interesting response to the sentiment expressed by the kids, the

women sang of rising above hardships, of "good days and hard times." Julia Ladson of the center read a poem between songs about life in Red Hook, from when "We came to Red Hook with heart and hammer" to today's difficult state of affairs in the area.

She closed saying, "We're pushing for what we want. There have been too many deaths." Her words lingered above the silent audience, clearly all were affected.

DANCE DESCRIBE WORKERS' LIFE

The band moved us onto the next warehouse with sharp notes and dragging feet, for "Work Song Go/Work Dance/After Work." After the interlude of youth expressing need for a future and the women of the Senior Citizen's Center stressing the need for immediate change, Ms. Bowers chose to return to a study in dance of the deep past in an attempt to reveal a new future. The three selections described the ritual of the worker, from dawn to dusk on the old waterfront.

"Go" expressed voyage to the workplace with dancers' long strides and bumping shoulders. The "Work Dance" was an elaborate passing of burlap sacks between longshoremen arranged in a circle. With quick hands and tightened muscles, the sacks eventually were heaped on cargo nets and raised to the rafters. Work was done.

In "After Work" tap dancer Hank Smith hoofed his way down platforms arranged on the warehouse floor. His movements were slow and difficult, tired yet revealing this worker's enthusiasm. Finally reaching the end of the "docks," Smith donned a worn overcoat and slumped his way toward the back door. The great steel doors swung open revealing an impressive view of the darkening sky and still harbour, with the image of the Statue of Liberty in the distance fighting its way through the fog.

In "Those Times, These Days", the final performance of the afternoon, choreographer Bowers joined forces with Theatrical Sound Designer John Gromada for a piece that embraced the life of the Red Hook waterfront and attempted to plot its journey from birth to abandonment. Three couples danced among steel columns, through fog covering the floor. The song of the sea toned in with their movements.

The sounds of lapping waves, fog horns and ships' bells filled the room. But the smoothly flowing scene soon collapsed into hissing machine and hammering pipes. Dancers became freight, others became longshoreman, loading, moving bodies. Battle ensued with the crash of broken glass, dance became a struggle for power. The scene ended with mayhem from David Pleasant's band and the downfall of industry on the Red Hook waterfront. After a short silence, students from P.S. 15 and P.S. 27 rapped with the band, singing "Translate the Rage"