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Spring in their steps

## A tangled web

Paula Hunter's 'Away From Home'

By **JOHNETTE RODRIGUEZ** | April 30, 2013

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SPIDER-WOMAN Hunter.

In an ongoing series of monologues that began with Paula Hunter's *Home Alone* more than five years ago, this comic commentator on life as she (and we) know it is currently presenting *Away From Home* at the Church of the Redeemer (655 Hope St, Providence, May 7 and 8 at 6 pm). Following the format of previous *Home* pieces, young dancers from Hunter's JUMP! company join her in creating movements or gestures that underscore her descriptions and observations.

The spotlight piece of the evening is "The Spider Bite," with musical interludes by Prokofiev, Ali and St. Lunatics, and Cream. Most of the dance sequences are "set" to Hunter's narration, in which she ties the bite of a brown recluse spider to the machinations of an interfering neighbor to the 2005 London bombings.

There are signature characteristics to Hunter's story: hypochondria, fantastical tangents, self-mockery, and hilarious images. One of the latter is that the spider bite occurs between her ring and pinkie finger and the throbbing pain forces her digits into a "mini-peace sign." Another is her nodding and sipping politely at a cocktail party in "rustic Rhode Island," where sitting on logs may have been the source of the spider who, she discovers online, "wants to be alone, lives in woodpiles, and bites at twilight."

From the moment that this bite wakes her from a deep sleep and she is "yanked upright," the five dancers, in black leotards, begin to enact Hunter's words: "sprawled, dazed and terrified, practically mummified." They study their hands with worried looks, as Hunter remembers an ominous pronouncement from her dermatologist: "Small is sometimes worse than big."

The dancers nod and sip at the cocktail party, as Hunter first listens to the complaints of a vigilante neighbor who bugs everyone with anonymous notes about "listing gutters" or squirrels getting into her yard. Hunter also repeatedly describes the pain she's enduring in her hand and its mysterious assault on other parts of her body, but she thinks it's infinitely better than going to a doctor and ending up with an MRI.

When she eventually gets to a doctor, the satire shifts from herself to the medical professionals, and her hysteria over the bite is replaced with fright about her daughter being in London during the bombings. As the plastic surgeon examines her hand, he mentions another spider bite patient who had been climbing trees to spy on her neighbors. And the tale meets its tail quite neatly.

The props that Hunter and her dancers rely on range from cinnamon rolls to frozen peas, from combat boots to toe shoes (in her spider bite delirium, she catches a TV program of hip-hop on point). The most clever of these visual aids is holding up a doctor's coat, stethoscope in pocket, as the doctor in Hunter's story speaks, or a nurse's work blouse (complete with a design of hot water bottles all over it) when the nurse is quoted.

The second half of the 50-minute program contains four dances to John Cage: "One Arm, One Eye," "Trio," "Quintet," and "Three Plus Two." The dancers — Emma Belkin, Elena Bonitati, Sophie Herreid, Amelia Pappas-Horii, and Ruby Stenhouse — have collaborated with Hunter on the choreography, and they respond to Cage's musical sequences with





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Cage can sound sometimes metronomic — the dancers bend to the floor, their arms flopping like a rag doll or their hands waving just above it — and sometimes like machinery grinding, banging, and clanging. The latter impression is also echoed effectively in the dancers' movements, as arms roll around their midribs or are flung upward as they leap in arabesque.

The last piece by the five dancers is a structured improvisation dedicated to one of the Boston bombing victims — a three-year-old who lost a foot. Hunter explained in a Q&A after the show that such a dance has defined rules, but it's like "scribbling in space."

The JUMP! dancers performed confidently, expressively, and with much grace and humor. After all, so does their mentor and director, Paula Hunter.

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