

# Dancing with Eva Yaa Asantewaa: Exclusive Reviews

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When it was a working facility, Brooklyn's McCarren Park Pool—built in 1936, closed in 1983—could accommodate up to 6,800 swimmers at a time. Choreographer Noémie Lafrance doesn't have quite as many participants at her disposal, but in *Agora*—her latest site-specific adventure—she does her best with dozens of performers to make every inch of the vast, abandoned outdoor space spring to life. The result is a bit like dropping Fellini onto a Cecil B. DeMille set; there's ample room for dream-like whimsy now that the elephants and Roman centurions have packed up and gone home.

In past seasons, Lafrance coaxed audiences into the exquisite 12-story stairwell of a courthouse clock tower to watch dancers enact her scarily dramatic *Descent*. In *Noir*, she lured audiences into cars parked on the ramps of a municipal garage to witness 1940s film characters enact dicey encounters. Her much-lauded, award-winning visions are a wow, and it's a sure thing that her downtown arts audience will follow her anywhere. At first glance, though, the block-long McCarren ruin, with its forbidding, sky-high arched entranceway, did not inspire hearty confidence. Nor did Lafrance's opening night, ribbon-cutting ceremony in which a clutch of officials—including the always-ebullient Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz—joined her mid-pool to make inaudible statements and snip at a length of yellow police tape that read "Caution." Nonetheless, with this act, the nicely cleaned-up pool returned to active duty for performances and community activities.

The audience sat or stood around the pool's rim staring down into its raw expanse. (We had been offered the option of walking around the rim to view the dance from a multitude of angles, but no one seemed to take that opportunity.) A pre-autumnal breeze moved swiftly as the sky darkened and a tri-quarter moon hung low. The distant spire of the Empire State Building peeked from between McCarren Park's trees, blinking red. Finally, at 8:15, a dancer slipped down from the rim, casually strolling across the rough surface. The cheeky soundtrack (by Brooks Williams and Norm Scott) initially suggested water lapping at a wall and hinted at fathoms to be explored. True to that promise, over the next hour, the score would visit and overlap virtual continents of sounds and music.

In the distance, a runner streaked across the ground, his or her form largely obscured by the pool wall's row of bright lights. In another area, a woman advanced as if walking a tightrope, the long, pale strips of her skirt blowing wildly in the breeze. Another slowly strode forward, decked out in a big striped dress, red sneakers, and a sun hat with a humongous brim that obscured her face. More and more dancers ventured outward: youngsters, a hooded man noisily dropping the same four wooden planks to create a kind of moving pathway for his steps, a flock of guys in suits and fedoras, a woman paddling her way through invisible water, two sticks of bamboo surrounding her hips like the frame of a kayak.

The simplest ensemble movements—springy, dipping torsos, wide-flung arms—evoked those who once enjoyed swirling and splashing around in the pool. But beyond these interspersions of dancey dance, the space percolated with activity that could break out anywhere and at anytime: virtuoso hula hoop artists, a squadron dribbling basketballs, a duo—from the master acrobatic dance troupe STREB—splashing up a mini-pool of water, a couple of very young white kids making a hesitant attempt at hip-hop steps, and big groups assaying a slick kind of jazz-less jazz routine to Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground." A woman glided through on a bicycle. Dancers with skateboards strapped to their backs were twirled by partners. Salsa dancers cavorted. A black VIP strode down a just-delivered red carpet. A chef pelted towards a corner, brandishing his broad kitchen knife. All time converged in the pool as if someone had shaken out a very big sack of brightly-colored balls and let them bounce and roll where they will.

Dancers parked their gear in spaces between seated observers and would regularly hop onto these perches to change costumes, slurp a bottle of Poland Springs, or just wait for their next cue. They seemed unconcerned about (even unaware of) the folks sitting on either side of them. Some individuals or groups—a languid troupe of pop video hoofers or a terrific flamenco dancer, for instance—performed close to one or another section of the audience.

Viewers could eye a certain area of action or let their gaze roam from one side of the pool to the other, from the deep to the shallow end. Something intriguing might be too distant to see clearly, or it might be tucked in a corner so that a viewer would have to tip forward to spy it. Eventually, the wise learned to just go with the flow. When a cheerful laundress hung a garment on a clothesline near my side of the pool only to have it stolen by a quickfooted woman, I kept watching the thief and her pursuer as they dashed far away. Competing spectacles and mini-dramas broke out everywhere but I was so amused by this interaction that I stayed with it as long as I could.

Around 9:15, the performers sank down on the bottom of the pool and sat around like a happy caravan of carnies resting before moving on to another village. I got the impression that a few of them were waving us down to hang out with them. Two people did just that, but most of us merely applauded.

Unlike Lafrance's *Descent* and *Noir*, *Agora* does not offer a severely compressed space that shapes the dance and our experience of it. McCarren Park Pool looms large with a seeming infinitude of possibilities. Lafrance liberally sprinkles charms that we can use to create the dance as we watch it, as we take in those elements that tickle us and turn away from those that interest us less. Perhaps in this way Lafrance signals her intention to give the pool back to the people, and to give dance back to its audience. How we choose to see—and to dream—is every bit as important to her as her own acts of creation.

Catch *Agora* now through October 1 at 8pm. For schedule details, travel directions, and ticketing, see [www.sensproduction.org](http://www.sensproduction.org) or call 718-302-5024.