

Subconscious Messages

JANA HAIMSOHN
at Randolph Street Gallery

By Maura Troester

You know that moment right before you fall asleep when odd, surreal images walk into your daytime thoughts? Saturday night, after seeing Jana Haimsohn's performance at Randolph Street Gallery, I was dozing off when this image of her crept in. She was dancing in her wily African way when her undulating body slowly turned into an orange sheet of fabric, billowing and flickering like fire. "That's it," I thought to myself, and then I was asleep.

Haimsohn's performances communicate with our subconscious. This may be because her work seems to grow out of her own subconscious. When she dances—a mix of African, Haitian, and Brazilian steps—she of-

ten chants a sort of scat psychobabble. The sounds seem to bubble up from her gut and move through her body, growing more intense with each repetition until they crescendo and subside. We become entranced by the repetition and rhythm, caught up and charmed by her gyrating body.

In *Unstuck/Unglued*, her first number—or maybe it was *Better Run*, her second number (they sort of blurred together)—Haimsohn's driven vocals and rhythms seemed to follow a certain logic, as if it took a while for her to process her subconscious ideas into language. She begins dancing a voodoolike dance, punctuated by la-la-la's and tch-tch-tch's until the words "Come on," then "hey," fall out of her mouth, followed by a "who, who, who who who," which she repeats so often its meaning is erased. Finally coherent sentences come out. This is her Chicago debut, she says.

Before she came, a friend called her from here and told her about a conversation he had at the Art Institute with a guy who saw her video. "That babe's really out there," was his conclusion. "Ooh—Windy City!" was her reply. "I'm glad some people call me an artist," because otherwise "they'd put me away." Haimsohn, it turns out, is a surprisingly lucid talker.

Vocally and physically she's a locomotive, whether kicking her heels up or piercing the sky with a falsetto la-la-la. She performed 15 pieces Saturday night, mixing poetry and other text with dance, vocal music, and percussion. Sometimes she stops dancing and just talks, other times she dances to her own raplike political poetry, which includes such lines as "There's power in my panties!" and "Spare some change, missa? Georgie! How about some changes up there!"

Other times certain key words ex-

plode out of a string of scatlike vocalizing, as in her very funny *Za Za Zen*. Sitting on an upside-down drum, Haimsohn lifts her arms and legs in front of her and begins convulsing as

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if uncontrollably. Staccato sounds spill out of her mouth, transform into a "Za" noise, and eventually the word "Zen!" bursts out. Then she's calm, but it's a precarious calm that's gradually overpowered by her uncontrollable shakes. The process repeats itself,

exploding again into the word "Zen!" until she yells out "Please! I can't sleep!" She then begins a litany, "Worry, work, worry, work, muddle muddle muddle. Please! Help from Tibet? Oh! You bet! More meaningful medicinal meat that matters!"

Haimsohn is most captivating when she tells stories about herself and her family, as in *Daddy/Danny*. Some of her more political pieces (*Better Run* and *Printed Punch*) seem a bit forced and preachy, and they weren't helped much when she tripped over her lines. But despite these minor flaws she continuously drew us in through her fascinating rhythms. We seemed to be witnessing a primal ritual designed to cleanse and purify. And it worked. Though it had been a wild, percussive evening, I left the theater feeling strangely calm. And her actions stayed with me, even—especially—when sleeping.