

# *Birds of a Feather*

Bird-themed dances are nothing new. In addition to the likes of “Swan Lake” (in its numerous iterations, Hello, Matthew Bourne!), “The Firebird” and “The Dying Swan,” there was also Merce Cunningham’s 1991 “Beach Birds.” In 2005, Luc Petton, a choreographer and amateur ornithologist, went a step further with his “La Confiance des oiseaux (“The Birds’ Confession”), with his company, Le Guetteur, interacting with birds such as crows and starlings in a gentle, surreal meditation on avian bonding. And in 2012, Petton premiered “Swan” at Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris, bringing together dancers and, well, real live swans!

## *Performance*

Lenio Kaklea's “The Birds

## *Place*

The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, CA, November 7-9, 2025

## *Words*

Victoria Looseleaf



*Luisa Heilbron in Lenio Kaklea's “The Birds.” Photograph by Josh Rose, courtesy of MOCA*

Enter now Paris-based Lenio Kaklea, a Greek-born dancer choreographer and director, and her 2025 work, “The Birds.” Seen in its US premiere at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA last weekend as part of Wonmi’s Warehouse Programs, the 70-minute dance, according to Kaklea’s program notes, explored “how humanity can relate to living creatures through the prism of dance.”

And so it did. Featuring seven glorious terpsichores in an array of fabulous bird-themed costumes by Olivier Mulin, the work was set to an electronic score by Eric Yvelin. The latter, also the technical director, was, according to Kaklea, granted access to the bioacoustics laboratory database of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), which contained a vast number of field recordings.

That said, this deep dive into terns, swallows, hummingbirds, et al, began with a bare-chested Louis Nam Le Van Ho alone on the stage, a slightly raised platform in this vast warehouse. Bathed in Jean-Marc Ségalen’s red light, he wriggled his shoulders, and, swanning his arms, moved his head and neck in a hunt-and-peck-type vibe, his body seemingly double—or triple—jointed as he also bent from the waist while skittering about.

Soon another creature, Luisa Heilbron, whose feathers were attached to gold leather-like pants, swooped in deploying perfect arabesques, as well as running and leaping jubilantly. The rhythmic soundtrack seemed to also amplify her flitty moves, with Dmitri Mytilinaios joining in the preening procession with lovely unison pirouettes that gave way to fugue-like moves. The music, fanfaresque, sounded the arrival of Nefeli Asteriou. Clad in a blue, breast-baring leather jacket and black tights, she executed pendulum-like sideways thrusts in rhythm with the score, near Vangelis-like (“Chariots of Fire”) in sound.

Indeed, these movers personified Kaklea’s intention, that this “represents a queer utopia, where hybrid beings effortlessly transition between rhythmic and repetitive group movements, silence and immobility, and individual scores.”



*Amanda Barrio Charmelo and Liza Baliasnaja in Lenio Kaklea's "The Birds." Photograph by Josh Rose, courtesy of MOCA*

And did we mention deep, deep pliés? These parliaments, these congregations, these gaggles/birds of a feather, not only had articulated feet and Rockette-like precision but also managed rapid-fire kicks alternating with those aforementioned extreme knee-bends. Especially thrilling, since this writer was sitting in the first row, was the up-close-and-personal look at these broods' faces, the females, including Liza Baliasnaja and Amanda Barrio Charmelo sporting extremely long eyelashes, which they batted and fluttered, helping to augment their birdlike, coy countenances.

With puffed chests, leaps à la Nijinsky, and full-frontal variations on fifth position—at times, accompanied by crossed arms behind the back as if a bird's tail—the ensemble also offered an array of head spasms, with sweat beginning to stream down their visages. This was intensity squared, as images of love birds and their antitheses—fighting cocks—came to mind in these pas de avians. And dispelling any notion that peacocks were the highest form of preeners, this circus of well-heeled puffins ceaselessly revealed secrets of the body.

At one point, Mytilinaios hoisted Jaeger Wilkinson over his shoulder, and, as if a response to “Do with me what with you will,” the pose became a portrait of stamina, with the hoister then doing a solo series of moves on a—what else—trapeze that dropped down from the ceiling. Recalling, but in a dancery way, the mighty Burt Lancaster in the classic 1956 film, “Trapeze,” Mytilinaios, having been instructed on the prop by Christina Sougioultzi, whether with one arm, one leg or both, assumed more poses than a Versace runway model, all the while swinging or hanging in stasis much like a canary on a perch.

Concurrently, as the lights dimmed, snippets of text (credited to Lou Forster according to “Les Guérillères” by Monique Wittig and “Les chimères” by Gérard de Nerval), appeared on the screen at the back of the stage. Reflecting both lush scenarios—“The wings fly over the purple meadows”—as well as less bucolic imagery—“The weapons piled gleam in the sun”—Kaklea’s choreography took a darker tone, and was, again per her notes, “associating immobility with death, observation with control, and surveillance with war.”



*Liza Baliasnaja and Amanda Barrio Charmelo in Lenio Kaklea's "The Birds." Photograph by Josh Rose, courtesy of MOCA*

How fitting, then, that Le Van Ho returned to the stage with a tiny drone, shining a proverbial light on individual dancers, their smeary images appearing on the screen. As if the reverse of Hitchcock’s fabled 1963 flick, *The Birds*, in which icy blonde Tippi Hedren fights off flying predators, here, Kaklea’s birds are also the stalkers . . . but not for long.

Making use of surveillance and control themes, the choreographer brings us into the worlds both human and non-human, where de-feathering and de-pluming are the least of their worries, the drone a constant buzz, which, strangely, emitted sound textures reminiscent of Ligeti’s “Atmosphères,” decidedly boding ill for this flock.

And while each individual performer has his/her own identity, it’s the whole colony/covey that must be considered, a covey waiting for what? Imminent destruction? Mutantcy? Rebirth? With

Kaklea having been influenced by Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring* (1942), and having consulted with Scientific Interlocutor and bioacoustics scientist Thierry Aubin to learn about the territorial behavior of birds and their ability to express emotions, her dancers proved a potent raft of creatures who deserved not only to live, to fly, to roam free, but also to teach us a little about life.

A startling performance in a myriad of ways, the dance offered much food, albeit not bird seed, for thought, leaving a long-lasting impression on this scribe.

### ***Victoria Looseleaf***

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Victoria Looseleaf is an award-winning, Los Angeles-based international arts journalist who covers music and dance festivals around the world. Among the many publications she has contributed to are the Los Angeles *Times*, the New York *Times*, *Dance Magazine* and KCET's *Artbound*. In addition, she taught dance history at USC and Santa Monica College. Looseleaf's novella-in-verse, *Isn't It Rich?* is available from Amazon, and her latest book, *Russ & Iggy's Art Alphabet* with illustrations by JT Steiny, was recently published by Red Sky Presents. Looseleaf can be reached through X, Facebook, Instagram and Linked In, as well as at her online arts magazine ArtNowLA.