

Dance Theater in Small Spaces

by Mary Hodges

“Get out! Get out get out! *GET OUT!*” He’s yelling this right next to me, in a bathroom at full capacity with a just handful of people inside. Should I go? But I’m part of the audience—he doesn’t *really* mean me. No, no, he’s shouting at his lover, and I’m just pressed against the wall, watching their relationship unravel.

In one cast, he is Joseph Poulson, yelling at Heather Olson. “I’m gonna take a piss—get out!” Icily, she leaves. I’m terrified, though; I am practically between him and the urinal, but not so much that I’d actually have to move if he does decide to use it. It was one thing when his hair brushed against me, but I don’t know if I’m ready for this level of intimacy. For the next few excruciating moments, I weigh the discomfort of standing right next to Poulson peeing against the option of moving awkwardly away, distracting everyone from the “real” show. I really don’t want to be that person who shows up to an unconventional performance, set in a bathroom, then can’t even handle a little urination. My heart is racing, and I’m having the most intense relationship to a performance that I’ve ever had.

There’s another cast, and in that he is Luke Miller. Right after he and Darrin Wright have nearly wrestled each other out the door, he screams, “Get out!” Fortunately, I’ve seen this show before. I know I’m not going anywhere, he’s not talking to me, and (thank God!) he’s not about to take a piss. Briefly, the tension will hold, then it will simmer down and we’ll all have a little rest to breathe. But I’m wrong. In this version, Miller keeps building our anxiety, pacing and yelling, and I start to wonder if he might do something actually violent. He comes at us, arm raised, looking right into our eyes. “Get out!” The young woman in front of me, uninitiated to this production, utters, “Oh my God!” before she books it out of there. I follow, since this is clearly not going where I thought it was. Down the hall, Wright is huddled in a much smaller, single-use bathroom, the door ajar, muttering his complaints about Miller, who is now whistling eerily from the room we just left.

This is Yanira Castro’s *Dark Horse/Black Forest*, and it’s gripping, scary, adrenaline-producing work. I walked away from it with the kind of thrill you might get from doing something totally crazy with a stranger. It feels dangerous. There’s that intensity of not knowing what will come next, the intimacy, immediacy, physicality, and emotional suggestion—and the utter impossibility of being able to recreate that rush with words. Roller coasters have nothing on this.

On the one hand, Castro is overtly exploring our voyeuristic sides. We are *close* to these performers, and we’re watching them fight, dance, undress, and caress. There’s no given back-story, but we piece one together based on what we see (a wronged and a wrongdoer, for sure, but is the wrongdoer really wrong?). This is the same narrative illusion that feeds the tabloid market and has created a whole business of spying on strangers. But here, live, viewers are exposed in a way that we never are when we watch reality shows, or even when we see traditional performance set in darkened theaters. The lights are on so we cannot ignore the presence of others watching, and we see ourselves in C. Merritt Houghton’s mirror installations. Further, the objects of our gaze look back at us. One especially powerful moment happens during the couple’s ending reconciliation, when, after all that we’ve been through together, one dancer brings the other a cake. They eat it, cuddling on the floor, then kiss. Slowly, they turn to make eye contact with us, producing—in me at least—severe embarrassment.

But the intruding eye is just the tip of this venture. *Dark Horse/Black Forest* is a full contact, highly sensory event. The strange claustrophobia of it has the same heightening effect of a blindfold: magnifying every sound coming from outside, the heat, and the just-cleaned-bathroom smell. I am acutely aware of every structure in the small space, each intrusion of stall door, urinal, sink, mirror, fluorescent bulb (they line the walls thanks to lighting designer Kathy Couch). We are in this performance in a devastatingly obvious way.



Performers don't just break the fourth wall, they reach through it and touch you.

Dark Horse/Black Forest material has been performed in private bathrooms and for the public in European restroom venues, and its Gershwin Hotel engagement this June came on the heels of several other New York dance events in intimate environments. I missed site-specific choreographer Noemie LaFrance's *Home* in April, held in her living room. In it, her pregnant body was displayed on a table. Assistants gave audience members magnifying glasses to inspect details, which included a miniature pasture scene attached to her leg. *Dark Dining*, the ongoing blindfolded culinary experience, was created by choreographer and multimedia artist Dana Salisbury. And ... *within us*, the dance by Megan Sprenger/myworks shown at PS122 in May, collapsed the spatial divide audience and performers, the latter mingling with viewers in an open room before writhing and shaking their way through the crowd.

Coinciding with *Dark Horse/Black Forest* in June, Dance New Amsterdam presented former dancer Nancy Bannon's *The Pod Project*. The piece, presented previously at 20 Greene Gallery, is part of Bannon's growing body of interdisciplinary theater creations. If you went to see it, a painted, vaguely clown-like guide led you from one encounter to the next, each in an enclosed environment created within the theater. I first visited a makeshift cave, where a hibernating, hooded figure laid motionless; my attention wandered to the tiny art pieces implanted in the walls. Later, a woman in nothing but green paint and a few tube-objects danced for me, then took my hand. Another woman sobbed in the shower, and yet another confided that she was preoccupied with death before wishing me well with bright eyes and naming the traits about me that she found attractive. The scenes were surreal. One was set in an earlier era, suggestive of Jane Austen, while another featured a sexually closeted male character wrapped in a brightly colored cocoon. I was offered challah bread, cheese, a look at some wigs, friendship, and the ability to control the scene in front of me by ringing a bell.

For me, *The Pod Project* was bewildering. Each pod was utterly different from the others, not only in content and tone, but also in the quality of engagement. Some felt too empty (three minutes of crying? An entire scene dedicated to a man breastfeeding a puppet?), while others were so full of rich details that I would have happily stayed with the character twice as long. Just as my critical reaction was hijacking my experience, I encountered an older gentleman, in his living room, who put me (more or less) in my place. Kill 'em with kindness, and with humor. He offered me the bread, told me this wasn't his kind of show—is anything as good now as it was back in the day?—then explicitly addressed the most glaring weaknesses of the performance, cloaked with exaggerated disdain. Mainly, these were problems of scale. The spaces would ideally be more isolated (and soundproofed) from each other, and the performers did not always deliver the punch necessary to make a situation work. Still, this man told me, at the end of the day, you just have to keep making the work. Who was I to criticize the production values? He made a good point, but it felt defensive. Vision and execution simply didn't align.

The order of the pod viewings mattered, and the order of the performances I saw affected my experience as well. I saw both casts of *Dark Horse/Black Forest* first, and with the novelty of close interaction worn off, I left *The Pod Project* underwhelmed. Castro's work took its time creating an atmosphere, heightening each moment until, oversensitized, a well-orchestrated look became unbearable. Though interactive, the experience teased my voyeuristic impulses, shading my perception of Bannon's less cinematic, more dream-like journey. Ultimately, *The Pod Project* skittered over more content but rarely got under my skin.

In viewing *Dark Horse/Black Forest* and *The Pod Project*, John Dewey's conception of art as an active experience came to my mind more than once. Live art, of course, is new and different in each execution, but the individuality and ephemeral quality of these shows was magnified. So many variables impinged on the viewer's experience—where one stood in the bathroom, the order of the pods, the cast, how strongly a stimulus found response, and the way in which a performer delivered a line that one time—that any delusion of nailing down the material was ridiculous. Which was very exciting. Whatever failings there might have been, all of this work was *alive*.

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