

DANCE | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

On Artists and Audiences at American Realness

By BRIAN SEIBERT JAN. 16, 2018

Usually, after watching a performance that I'm reviewing, I'm alone with my thoughts and opinions. But that wasn't the case last week, after I caught Moriah Evans's "Figuring" at American Realness, the annual festival of experimental performance. Back home, I watched a short segment of the work on Instagram, part of The New York Times's weekly #SpeakingInDance series. And then I read the comments.

The video shows three women who look like they are having seizures — or, to paraphrase one of the comments, like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" meets twerking. Most of the comments (thousands, it went viral) were in that vein, treating the work and its strangeness as comedy, though many reactions were more hostile, taking it as a symptom of what's wrong with art or dance or white people.

I found the comments amusingly accurate and also unfair. Out of context, experimental performance is bound to attract ridicule, but the impulse to mock can blind. Show an artist some patience and you may be rewarded, or not. I normally take that for granted, but as I saw several other shows at American Realness, the relationship between artist and audience was on my mind.

Ms. Evans was on the less accommodating end of the spectrum. Her program note included an idea about taking internal physical processes and making them visible and audible. But that's as much help as she offered. As the performers twitched and moaned for 90 minutes, she or they occasionally intervened with verbal instructions or corrections — implying a method or a system that nevertheless remained opaque.

The odd behavior inspired a running commentary of quips in my head too, but because I have found Ms. Evans's previous work worthwhile (and because it's my job), I stifled them. Extended attention didn't help, though. The dancers' activity never really advanced or revealed anything new, so the work felt not just unpersuasive but far too static.

Antonija Livingstone, in "les études (heresies 1-7)," showed how it was possible to be fully hospitable and remain inscrutable. Escorting audience members into a studio at Gibney Dance, Ms. Livingstone smiled and spoke softly, like a hostess at a spa. And the room, decorated by the visual artist Nadia Lauro, did resemble a spa, one with basket weavers, the sound of surf and bare-chested people in blue mermaid wigs. Ms. Livingstone held a large live snail, a clear model for the work's pacing. Select audience members were treated to ear massages.

Jumatatu M. Poe, in the two parts of "Let 'im Move You" at Abrons Arts Center, could hardly have been more friendly. As he warmly explained near the start, the work is an exploration of J-Sette, a dancing form developed by female drill teams at historically black colleges and adopted by queer black dancers (and Beyoncé). Mr. Poe is a big guy with a cheerleader smile that could light up a stadium. He asked viewers to post footage from the show on the internet. He also explained how he was trying to address the problems of performing for mostly white audiences. Perhaps that is why he invited people to follow him and his talented collaborators (Jermone Donte Beacham and William Robinson) in and out of the theater, requiring more active effort. This viewer was grateful to share in the performers' joy in their dancing, intrigued by the framing of rhythm and desire, but frustrated by the bits-and-pieces, stop-and-start structure.

I often feel that way about shows at American Realness, where tight editing seems shunned as a mainstream convention. "Relational Stalinism" by Michael Portnoy had a related problem. It's an insider satire of avant-garde performance, and although most of its ideas are clever in concept (a dance of synchronized blinking), the execution is only intermittently funny, so much of the show becomes as dully self-indulgent as what it mocks.

Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis’s “The Way You Look (at me) Tonight” is quite different. It’s exceedingly casual, with the two performers weaving around seated viewers while chatting about themselves and books they have or haven’t read and climbing on each other.

Ms. Cunningham and Mr. Curtis are very concerned about accessibility. Ms. Cunningham is disabled, and her dexterity with crutches provides the show’s main physical appeal. But their notion of accessibility extends to “sensory diversity,” so text is both projected and spoken. The philosopher Alva Noë, in voice-over, verbalizes questions that might be going through an audience member’s head, like: “Why are they doing that?”

The commentary is much more polite and thoughtful than the Instagram comments, and it’s a little annoying. Ms. Cunningham and Mr. Curtis go overboard on audience outreach, explaining everything in a tone of apologetic disclaimer.

And yet of all the American Realness shows I attended, this one — often hokey, sometimes profound — made me think the most about the insides and outsides of bodies, about social perception and the experiences of others. When Mr. Curtis confessed his wish that viewers feel their time had not been wasted, the admission had a pitiful sound. But the humble goal was a generous one.

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