

Mixing and Matching

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Layard Thompson © Florence Poulian

Karen Bernard is that unusual artist who already at the age of three had a unique and eclectic trajectory. Studying with her father, Steven Bernard, she must have picked up the importance of wit and theatricality from Charles Weidman, with whom he danced. She is the driving force behind the Performance Mix Festival which features performances and open rehearsals at the Joyce Soho, photography and interactive installations, meetings, eatings and clubbing from the Seaport to Foley Square all produced by the New Dance Alliance, Inc., Bernard's non-profit wing that seeks to promote experimental work.

March 26 and 27, 2008 featured Bernard and three others who walk that sliver of a line between dance and everything else (talking, looking, dressing, singing, sitting, stomping, etc., etc.). Rachel Lund provided comic relief with color commentary between pieces that, in retrospect, was quite funny insofar as she had to immediately respond to pieces that escape immediate description. She went

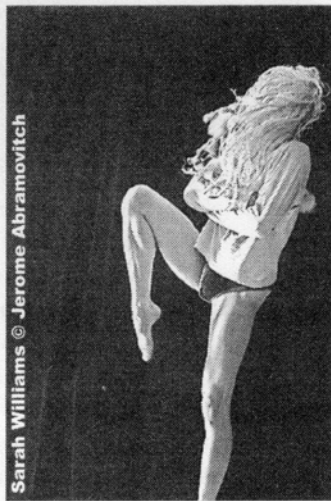
for the broad stroke and offered interpretive movement reviews. All the performers, including Lund, had that look of vintage dress-up disarray – with tattoos testifying further to their being up-to-date. Except, of course, for Bernard; she is a child of the Age of Aquarius who reenacts and reinterprets and reinforces the modes and mores of a 1950s housewife, gone mad.

In her *Surfing The Shadow* she returns to her familial theme, sharing a travelogue to a score by Owen Chapman (with Costa Rican Soundscapes by Doug Von Gausig and "Taboo Tu" by Arthur Lyman). Bernard talks her way through her emotions, the fourth wall present, though the truth lay bare. That wall protects all of us, and we can laugh heartily at the blandness, and ordinary regimen of her marriage. A simple photograph of her and her husband on vacation becomes hysterical – by the tilt of her head, blank set of her round face – and mundane, exasperated commentary. Between conversations Bernard adds simple movements – a sweep of the arm folding into a pose – or throws herself into a burlesque strip tease. Revealed is a woman untouched by the Pilates craze, and seeming quite happy about that.

Cynthia Hopkins has been showing parts of *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success): work in progress* around town for a while. Maybe she's invented a new genre – the time-specific performance. Each time I've seen it, parts have been revised or deepened, something has been added or a new story line emerges. But Hopkins is a wonderful singer and writer and has a set designer's eye for placing herself in costume (or in prop). The work-in-progress feel is still there, but she always provides a complete snack. In this version Hopkins, dressed up like a cowgirl gypsy, gives her plaintiff voice a lot to do. Hopkins's personality always emerges even when she is a character in her own vignettes but there is a bit of the Tracey Ullman, showing multiple accounts of her doomsday vision of the Earth (all the while fighting to save us).

Nathalie Claude challenged me with CERVEAU FÊLÉ 101 (BROKEN BRAIN 101) from her *The Madness Trilogy*. With a clanging soundtrack by Isabelle Lussier, and a set that suggested a garret at the Bates Motel, Claude starts out in a strait jacket, made up for maximum madness with

blackened eyes and unkempt hair. White bread decorates her small abode and she alternates between French and English in her rants, spitting out frightening, repetitive worries or consolings, along with yellow goop. Claude is active in experimental theatre in Montreal but was also a regular on a popular sitcom in Québec and perhaps it's that television-savvy timing that saves this piece from unrelenting misery. It's not fun at all to watch a mad person but Claude captures the mind-set and thought process of any of us going through a manic phase. Her endurance and uncompromising adherence to her character and piece are admirable.



is a wiry mover and appears well equipped to handle Hay's ponder and play choreography. Although Thompson wields scissors, his warrior is more deer-like. The choreography is non-linear, non-narrative, and all over the space. Thompson -- quirky, unassuming, questioning, quixotic and nonchalant -- wins you over.

Sitting near me at a different show at the Joyce Soho, Bernard commented on a dance we had just seen, "Very abstract." I agreed. There was also an enormous amount of "dance" -- rhythmic movement of the body. But dance can scoop up any non-verbal communication -- ideas, sense, thought, emotion -- for its own sake and

Layard Thompson finished the program with his adaptation of Deborah Hay's "The Runner," renamed *The Warrior*. (A fascinating manifesto of Hay's Solo Performance Commissioning Project appears on her website.) Thompson

beauty. The Performance Mix Festival does what it says -- mixing performance with everything around us. For Bernard abstract is okay, but telling a subtle story about being human seems crucial.✂

Karen Bernard & Scott Wixon © K. Bernard

