

Karen Bernard: Oulette



photos: Ella Veres

by Robert Tyree

You know what scares me? The prospect of performing as a hobby – as just another thing you do because you’re you. Nature Theatre of Oklahoma had a fascinating dirty-confession moment in their *Romeo and Juliet* (TBA:10) where the actors ranted about their craven need to be seen and loved by an audience. Such a need is a fundamental factor in live performance. Obvious perhaps, but often too obvious to flash and stick to our ideas surrounding a particular performance. Commanding an audience’s attention is terrifyingly seductive. If I perform just to make you think I’m cool, or because I would be a less interesting person if I did not perform – if I don’t have anything else at stake but my sense of self grandeur in your consenting eyes – then I deserve to be called out and dismissed as a lifestyle performer, a terrible misallocation of our contemporary resources.

When I perform, I want it to be singular. I want to be invested. I don’t want to maintain my ironic distance or cool nonchalance.

But Portland has avowedly low-key tendencies. One unsavory consequence being that too often we let slide habits that ought to have a hard kick before they’re left to the mercy of dangerously slippery slope. This past Thursday, new-in-town Boom Arts, PICA and tEEth presented *Made Here NYC/PORTLAND*, “a documentary screening and panel discussion on the daily lives and challenges of performing artists in New York City and Portland, OR.” I was struck by the prominence of a by-any-means-necessary attitude in the NYC interviews, and how contrastingly rose-tinted the Portland panel felt after the screening. We certainly have assets in Portland, most notably—in

the comparison to New York—ample time and space. But we also battle shortcomings that ought be addressed.

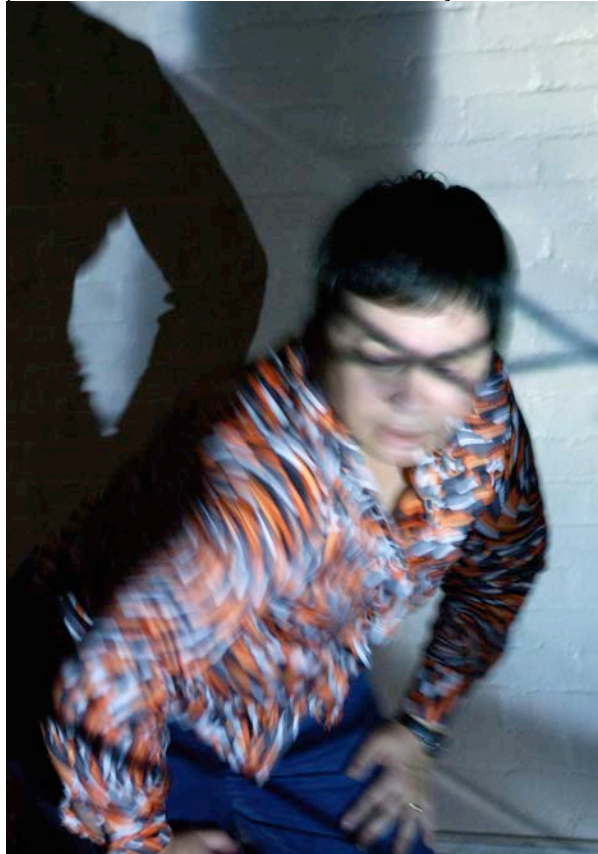
It was a relief, then, when a panel participant voiced discontent with Portland peers' hesitation to offer frank criticism of work that needs some fine-tuning: *If I give you something half baked and ask your opinion, I need you to tear it apart. I'm not putting this out there because I want you to go down on me to make me feel better!*

We've all been there. After a performance, with your friends...why rock the boat? What need to get all strenuous at whittling away a performance?

I fall from a bridge when a certain thought pops in my mind: *I could half-ass this, and the repercussions would be trivial. Why try so hard? Why get yourself all stressed out? Some people are going to see you, and then they'll tell you you did a great job.*

Issues at stake: integrity, devotion, vision.

If that's too abstract for you, get down to Performance Works NorthWest (4625 SE 67th, 503.777.1907) for tonight's final performance of *Alembic #14* with Karen Bernard, a choreographer and multi-discipline solo performance artist based in New York City.



Friday night, Karen gave a masterful performance of *Ouette*, an exquisitely crafted solo piece, visually gorgeous and thoroughly intriguing, emotionally captivating, a shot in the arm of audience imagination. The world she created by employing technical kit that anyone reading this could easily manage was astonishingly complete. I was all in. As were the three other audience members.

Now, if I was performing for four people here in Portland, I might be tempted to give it a nickel's effort. How can I generate the charged artifice of a performative state when I can track each audience member's seated posture? In this regard, Karen inspired: achieving a performance that mysteriously

beckons and carries our attention, at times wildly unresolved, genuinely erotic and neatly composed, with all the affect of narrative's peaks, troughs and pathos but lacking any imposition of a master interpretation. She inhabits her body and fills her movement with a calibre of vision and artistry that's a joy to behold.

I kept thinking: Why isn't the sound pumping through the system really loudly? What's up with these tiny speakers? For all that underwhelmed in volume, the soundscape was highly accessible in effect, dotted with pop references (Soft Cell, Nouvelle Vague) and fit within a sensory economy that allows each media to have an aesthetic presence in the piece. The slanted throw of a moving projector transforms the set, as a cart of gear and a chair roll across the floor and the content being projected takes on various properties: now concrete props, now tongue-in-cheek self references, now color tones. These are not part of the furniture, but objects whose materiality sits in and emits throughout the piece.

Quette has been three years in the making. For one more night, we have it here in Portland.

Also on the Alembic #14 bill, Tim DuRoche and Michael Stirling perform a work for voice/tambura and 40" wind gong. Alembic continues tonight, Saturday, May 21 at 8 PM. \$12-15.

ADDITIONALLY

ARTISTS LEAD Panel & Community Discussion

Sunday, 2pm, PWNW, (free)

Performance Works celebrates the occasion of Karen Bernard's visit to Portland with an invitation to a panel discussion and community roundtable moderated by Tim DuRoche probing the role of small, artist-run organizations as fundamental, essential enzymatic forces in a larger creative ecosystem. Bernard, the founder and director of New Dance Alliance in NYC, just celebrating its 25th anniversary, will be joined by Linda Austin of Performance Works NW, Brian Weaver of Portland Playhouse, Marc Moscato of The Dill Pickle Club and Jeremy Rossen of Cinema Project. The Sunday afternoon conversation will look at artist-space and artist-led initiatives as conveners, catalysts, incubators; the challenges they face; models of survival and sustainability; and how these spaces exist to serve artistic 'biodiversity', provide voice for community, or provide platforms for the working artists. Bagels and coffee will accompany the discussion.