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Ballet Hispanico, Photo: Paula Lobo

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Blakeley White-McGuire in Martha Graham's "Diversion of Angels." Photo by Sara D. Davis, Copyright Sara D. Davis.

Audience Reviews

Karen Bernard Projects presents "Showgirls"

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Karen Bernard Projects May 17, 18, 19, 2018

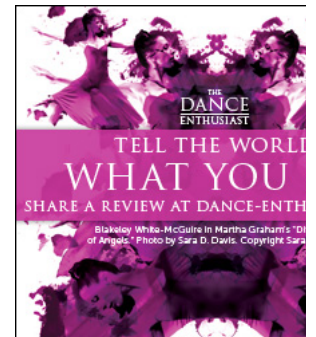
Haiku Review:

"Another pose, another swoosh,
Another stomp, a wiggling tosh
Another reason, another season
As we see Showgirls..."

Freeform Review:

I couldn't help thinking of the song "Making Whoopee" in Karen Bernard's latest rendition of Showgirls.

The audience enters a church and goes upstairs to a gorgeous horizontal space. Seated, they stare at the one obvious set piece in the middle of this high ceilinged room: a dark gray Eames style couch with high



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ABT Giselle: Copeland's Dramat

arms. At the opening of the dance, slide projections allow us to contemplate photos of a decaying Venice in all its fading, yet glorious stature. These are the first of many elements of the piece that will keep us wondering as we try to interpret (or not) the mysteries of Showgirls.

The choreographer/performer (two among the many dance-related hats Karen Bernard wears) created this new rendition of an earlier piece in a residency at Brooklyn Studios for Dance with the help of Jil Guyon and Rachel Thorne Germond, dancers/choreographers/filmmakers in their own right. One surprise extra, Lisa Parra, roller skated smoothly into the ending of this interpretive piece, wheeling onto the stage a bar cart with a samovar-like container filled with Aperol spritz that the audience could drink to close the evening and schmooze.

Bernard is the Perle Mesta of our time, often having soirees in her Tribeca loft, usually with a performance. This rendition of Showgirls evolved into an hour-length work from the 20-minute glimpse I saw last year.

The three main performers introduce themselves in a short lineup in the beginning, all bare-legged and in variations of dressy black dresses, with Guyon and Germond in T-strap heels, and Bernard in kitten heels. Whether dance-y or workwoman-like, the three showgirls begin to strut along what appears to be a self-styled horizontal runway as if they were models. They take poses, stand still, make sharp turns, building into more aggressive rumbling as the piece thickens.

It's evident these ladies are having a good time in graceful sways and, at times, antic moves. They look like anything but fading violets as they splash in and out of their bodies and dresses and swerve with the retro music. They make their turns, and take turns—walking, skipping, and waving along the “runway.” In each of several solos, there is a lot of stillness in the posing as each “girl” wags, waves, and stomps as if in a fit of frustrated emotion.

Bernard seems to form a matrix in which the two other performers, Guyon and Germond, rarely interact with her except to build their own steps and poses and strut around her. At times Germond whisks her dress violently and audibly, and gets out of breath. Guyon is quite the stomper, and Bernard is quite rhythmic, almost grapevining along the horizontal, looking suspicious at times and often literally breaking into stillness.

The big catch, though, we figure out early on. Showgirls is highly satirical. Another kind of showing off of the female body. None of the three are anorexic models we're used to seeing on the runway, nor are they young sweet things, and all lack the expressionless stares we've grown used to with high fashion. These three are mature women taking on individualized temperaments of laughter, agony, seriousness, angst, joy, sadness, and breakdown. And all this happens within the confines of primping, modeling, wearing their feelings on their sleeves, and showing off their bare legs in their sometimes choreographed, sometimes improvised dances. I like the way they never once break character, as each takes solo turns in her own individual body language.

It was interesting that Showgirls was performed on the weekend of the Royal Wedding, with all its pomp and ceremony. No white wedding dresses here. No Phantom Thread of tidiness. This is a fun piece to watch, but also dark and contemplative with the silences and stillness during the runway “runs.” No happily ever after in this piece of work, although there is some joie de vivre when the roller skater zooms on at the end.

The arc of the dance for me was when Bernard starts talking while lying with her back to the audience saying, matter-of-factly, “I have nothing to worry about,” while projections of sumptuous cheese wheels, antipastos, and marzipan pastries amorphously appear. I missed the part where she ends up slithering to the floor, after laying big pillows on top of one another, repeating as if to convince herself “I have nothing to worry about” in various tones, implying that perhaps she does indeed have something to worry about. But what? The voices she evokes are of angst and wonder, even bitter wonder. We in the audience also wonder: why is she worried? She is not answering to anyone. This angst seems to come out of the blue, but somehow, it fits in with the delicate balance of the pivoting, the runway walking, the sudden laughter,



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the grins, the frowns, the modest, but at times showoff-y stances. For the most part, there was an attitude of pride in these women, strutting their stuff. And the skater just fills the bill, lightening the whole thing up by rolling in at the end to serve the drinks.

There is much room for interpretation: what do the boxes on the side mean as Germond and Guyon carry them on and off at the end? Big boxes, as if they're packing the belongings of their youth away and getting on to the next stage of life. Are they in a big transition? Models are often associated with boxes, to hold their wares. I remember seeing boxes in Phantom Thread. These weren't hat boxes, however, and boxes can imply so much.

"Picture a little love nest
Down where the roses cling
Picture that same sweet love nest
Think what a year can bring..."

Yes, even in an hour, time passes rather quickly with the slides, décor, pillows, boxes, and a film on the side as if mirroring, but not distracting from the main action.

After seeing a 20-minute version of this performance art, very post, very in character, and going to a 50-minute variety of moves and moods, I'd say to Bernard and gang, "You've come a long way, baby."

Collaborators included Andi Stover, dramaturg;
Hwa Park, costume design;
Video editor, Jil Guyon;
Emma Rivera, Lighting Design;
Jane Goldberg is a writer, archivist, and performer Janegoldberg.org;
Pepper Fajans is Brooklyn Studios for Dance's founder, director, curator.

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Photo Credit: Karen Bernard's Showgirls photo by Svetla Atanasova



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