

By **JENNIFER DUNNING**

Karen Bernard is older and heavier than the dancer of popular image. But she used rather than disguised those qualities in dark and brainy solos, set to popular music, that she presented on Thursday night at the Joyce SoHo. The hourlong program, shared with Sandra Botnen and Ana Vega, had the invigorating color and energy of first-rate conversation.

Ms. Bernard subtly explored concepts of femininity and social role-playing, making her points as much through stillness and awkward rolling and crawling as through dance movement. In "Headphones, Heady, Headache," she could have been any tough-guy street-corner jiver, but her mechanic's coveralls unzipped to reveal a woman's skimpy black underwear.

"Dying for Lace," performed without a score, was an unnervingly acute portrait of depression. Ms. Bernard shifted seamlessly between defiant anger and flirtation in "Damn Your Eyes," as powerful as its accompaniment by Etta James. "It Could Have Been Different" was less evocation than theatrical tour de force, because of Liz Prince's stylish costume and the score, which juxtaposed drum music and versions of "A Boy Like That" by Selena and Scott Robinson, a wandering presence in the dance.

Two solos by Ms. Botnen, a Canadian choreographer and dancer of stunning imagination and physical control, were pure serendipity. She became an undersea creature in "Water." In "I Just Want Affection," she was a covert extrovert peeling off a stripper's crimson wrap and sequined dress to reach a wittily stylized nudity.

Ms. Vega affectingly portrayed a woman as unformed as a statue not yet emerged from a sculptor's block of stone in Ms. Bernard's "Solo for Ana Vega," danced to music by Bill Obrecht. Severn Clay designed the atmospheric lighting.

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A version of this review appears in print on April 7, 1998, on Page E00004 of the National edition with the headline: DANCE REVIEW; Vulnerable Behind the Sassy Roles.