



**THEATER**

# Living by Fragments

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Trajal Harrell calls his latest piece *Before Intermission* because it's first on a shared evening curated by Tere O'Connor; a program note suggests that the dance is "both literally and figuratively 'missing' its other half." What comes after the intermission is Karen Bernard's solo *Totally in Love*. The two choreographers' work is wildly dissimilar; however they share a flexible vision of time and memory. Both employ film or video to construct parallel realities. Both implicate the spectators by their gaze and/or spoken words.

Harrell's work was inspired by James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. In 1956, when the novel was published, much was made of the fact that Baldwin, an African American, was writing a *bildungsroman* whose troubled protagonist was a WASP expatriate in Paris. Harrell, who is black, has abstracted the concept of race in eerie, understated ways: Julie Alexander is wearing tan makeup, Anne Pinomaki-Ballantyne is in translucent whiteface (makeup and hair design by Carlos Villacres). But Harrell isn't concerned with narrative or in conveying that he, eyes closed, swaying to the tinny sound of violin music on a portable CD player, is remembering the tarted-up visions (costumes by Masala Browman) that periodically emerge from Erik Flatmo's gray fashion-show entrance and strut toward us, fixing us with that sullenly provocative stare. Our position as spectators is challenged when a man in the audience walks down the aisle and joins Arturo Vidich

in his posturing walk, keeping an earnest eye on Vidich, who keeps his sly gaze on us at all times. Lesson over, the novice re-crosses the fourth wall.

Resonating overlapping fragments suggest homoerotic love, the ambiance of a gay bar, sophistication both faux and real, the applying and removing of disguise (i.e. items of clothing). At one point three diverse pieces of music bleed together. Double-entendre lyrics (“I’ve got big balls”) roll up a video screen, also introducing the notion of balls as dance parties and segueing into a hotel ballroom scene that begins a very lengthy clip from *American Gigolo*, a film in which Richard Gere, like Baldwin’s David, moves in a world (not shown here) of drag queens and sex for hire, and, in which, as in *Giovanni’s Room*, a murder provides a climax.

Certain passages, like Harrell’s two brief, minimal solo appearances, have a mysterious resonance that goes beyond stimulating the eye and the intellect. In Thomas Dunn’s dramatic lighting, an enigmatic figure stalks toward us: a tall, slim flaming redhead (Luke Wylie) wearing high heels, makeup that wounds his (her) face, and a pale, flesh-colored unitard festooned with braids of hair, chignons, and tresses (costume by Steel and Knife Style). There’s something woebegone about this character seated on air, weight braced on hands and feet, swaying like a nervous spider, while the movie’s credits roll, and then reclining and stroking her throat with weary voluptuousness. When Wylie curls up to sleep, Isabel Gunther enters in dowdy plaid and hooks a contour sheet around the twitching figure.

There’s no emphasized ending to this cracked flow of people and images. A performer holds up a sign that says “intermission” and we’re left wondering what the nonexistent second act might reveal.

Instead, we get Karen Bernard, who isn’t concerned with the aesthetics of cool. If Harrell focuses on structural intersections and riffs on themes from a book (his program note says it doesn’t matter whether we’ve read it), the subject of Bernard’s *Totally in Love* (directed by Maureen Brennan) is her own life as a middle-aged wife, mother, and

dancer-choreographer. In material dating from 1995 to the present, dailiness is abstracted, polished, and fragmented, and Bernard's image multiplies and alters over time. A small television screen on a stand that doubles as bathroom shelves shows a video within a video. Bernard's giggling kids, in footage shot 10 years ago, cluster in front of her close-up head. Her rolling eyes and wary glances are both eerily connected and remote from their patting little hands and kisses. Later, the screen shows her older face—expressive, with big eyes and a generous mouth, but wearier here and alone. ese days, she muses, it's hard getting the much-older children to participate in her ventures —when they're around (the flip side: She can throw out some of the shampoos and lotions she's lined up on the floor)

Bernard's a large woman with a lusty, down-to-earth persona. For most of the piece she wears flip-flops, an orange T-shirt, and a green fern-print mini-skirt (if we prize aged wood, why hide cellulite?). In addition to pantomiming to the invisible family her need for privacy or reciting the many ways she's told them she loves them (and the often perfunctory echoes they return), she dances. Sometimes she stops or repeats moves, as if a snapshot's being shown over and over. At other times, moving with contagious pleasure to music she loves, she beams with her whole body, shaking it and rolling it around, throwing her arms up. She talks to us; she calls up to the control booth, wanting to dance to a Sinatra song she loves and finding that none is any longer quite right.

Bernard mixes the raw and the cooked, past and present, love's griefs and joys as if pattering about her house. Sometimes, the television screens hold only snow.

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