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The Dance Enthusiast's Brand of Review/Thoughts on What We See

IMPRESSIONS: New Dance Alliance's Performance Mix 35 at Community Center 122



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MOLLY&NOLA;'s "Steer"; Photo by Kathryn Butler

Curator: Karen Bernard

Cultural Partner: Movement Research

June 10-13, 2021

The site of [Performance Mix Festival 35](#)—a gravel-lined courtyard open to the elements on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—is less than ideal for dancing. Do the folks who manage this space have any idea how valuable it could be as a vertical parking lot?

Never mind. Some people are just nuts about the arts, and that would include the [New Dance Alliance](#), which has presented this festival since 1986, and [Movement Research](#), a partner in the event. Programmed by veteran taste-maker [Karen Bernard](#), Performance Mix 35 ran Thursday through Sunday, June 10-13, presenting a slate of experimental and wildly individualistic dances. The occasional rain-shower intimidated no one; audiences hunger for this explosion of creativity.

On Saturday, the 7:30 show began with a stroll down memory lane. Video clips highlighted some of the amazing artists whom the Performance Mix Festival has presented since its inception. We saw [Victoria Libertore](#) hula-hooping, and [Nathalie Claude](#) monologuing; [Jill Sigman](#) Motel 6-ing, and Freefall LTD. *Bolero*-ing. [Yvonne Meier](#) and [Ishmael Houston-Jones](#) tangled in a Contact Improv, and [Roxane Butterfly](#) appeared tap-tap-tapping. There were

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many more. What a history! This year's artists may not all make the 50th-anniversary performance reel, but the ones I caught all had something to say.



L-R: Michael Gene Jacobs, Johnnie Cruise Mercer, TJ Jacobs in Johnnie Cruise Mercer/The RED Project NYC's *A Bap sm in Rain*; Photo by Kathryn Butler

[Johnnie Cruise Mercer](#) starts out cagily in *A Bap sm in Rain*, performing inside the Movement Research studios adjacent to the courtyard, where we can hardly see him. Through the open windows we hear a monologue about a building that is destroyed; and we catch glimpses of Mercer coming and going with his fellow dancers [TJ Jacobs](#) and [Michael Gene Jacobs](#), members of TheREDProjectNYC. They stride purposefully, carry equipment, and break into skipping, bouncing moves. They take selfies. Videos projected on the outside of the building monitor what's taking place inside, but the images are too small to be helpful.

At first, this distance between the audience and the performers feels frustrating, but perhaps Mercer is making a point about what's public and what's private (such a loaded topic these days). The subject of *Bap sm*, after all, is a secret transformation that takes place inside the human heart. Eventually Mercer and his dancers emerge from the building and, frolicking to the sounds of a hymn ("Rain Down"), they make public their profession of faith.



Haruko Crow Nishimura in Degenerate Art Ensemble's *The Gatherer of Spring*; Photo by Kathryn Butler

[Haruko Crow Nishimura](#), a visiting artist from Seattle, expresses other concerns in her piece called *The Gatherer of Spring*. Collaborating with video artist [Leo Mayberry](#), costume designer [Wyly Astley](#), and composer [Joshua Kohl](#) under the banner of the [Degenerate Art Ensemble](#), Nishimura leads us deep into the woods where magic is real and peculiar creatures abide.

An elaborate, Victorian trellis appears framing the doorway through which Nishimura enters dressed all in white, and wearing a Good Fairy costume decorated with coral, mushrooms, and cabbage leaves. Lifting her skirt with pinched fingers, she steps gingerly onto the gravel. Halting and observant, Nishimura takes in the scene around her. The view seems to please her and allowing her head to loll she adopts a beatific expression. Now her hands begin to wander. Nishimura reaches out with tendril-like arms and feeds herself a morsel. She captures and inspects things we can't see and handles invisible filaments. A waterfall appears projected on the wall behind her, and then a forest of birch trees. In the distance, animals howl. After a brief nap (clearly she's one of those people who can fall asleep anywhere), Nishimura begins softly to vocalize, her whippoorwill call becoming a song.



Darrin Wright, Eleanor Smith, Leslie Cuyjet, and Kae Workum in Cuyjet's *Dance No. 1*; Photo by Kathryn Butler

On Sunday afternoon, the festival concluded with another showcase. The movement in [Leslie Cuyjet's](#) debut choreography, appropriately titled *Dance No. 1*, teeters unsteadily. [Kae Workum](#) tries to anchor herself, twisting her feet into the gravel; and [Darrin Wright](#) tries to help her dig in, but Workum topples anyway. When Cuyjet and [Eleanor Smith](#) appear, they cling to the back wall as if fearing to expose themselves to the source of this instability. Workum manages to stand, but keeps rising and sinking, waving in the breeze like a windsock puppet. Finally Cuyjet embraces her—support at last! Now the whole crew knot themselves together and head back toward the wall. Relaxing, they begin to converse; and it seems all this was just a rehearsal. Despite what appears to have been a false alarm, all of us had better be ready to hang on to one another when the ground becomes unstable.

[Alethea Pace's](#) *Here goes the neighborhood* . . . imagines another kind of solidarity. Her colleague, the spoken-word performer known as Holiday, lays it out for us. What some people call “gentrification” other people know as eviction from their homes. Having survived AIDS and a crack-demic, however, these Bronx residents aren't going to be side-swiped by a virus. Pace wanders through the space assembling memorial altars with white candles and flowers, but *Here goes the neighborhood*... is not a somber piece. “¡Nos quedamos!” Holiday declares. “We ain't goin' nowhere.” [Willie Colón](#) and [Mon Rivera](#) set the place on fire singing “Se te quemo la casa, Marcela,” and Pace and [Richard Rivera](#) face-off, seated on a pair of milk crates, their gestures alternately taut and melting in the music's glorious heat.



Alethea Pace and Richard Rivera in Pace's *Here goes the neighborhood...*; Photo by Kathryn Butler

In her own small way, [Nami Yamamoto](#) is a material girl. She arrives for her solo *powerless creature keeps going...* loaded with stuff that she unpacks and spreads on the ground. Does she own these things, or do they own her? It's hard to say. At first her dancing keeps stalling; and she pauses to collect herself before making her next move. She hunkers down, and then asserts herself walking with a grizzly-bear stride.

Now, however, Yamamoto's possessions begin to claim her. A soft, malleable object wrapped in plastic needs to be toasted by a lamp and rolled along a windowsill. Yamamoto skips with it and drops it down her shirt. Then a rough cord becomes a hair-extension that whips the air or attaches to her clothes. Finally, Yamamoto must balance two small objects, like cookies, on her forehead. Squaring with her arms extended for balance, she lets her jaw slacken and looks as if she's about to catch a fly-ball. All this is exhausting. [Mushroomhead's](#) song "[Empty Spaces](#)" sounds a lament, but Yamamoto's problem is not emptiness. On the contrary, her space is filled with things that preoccupy and distract her.



Nami Yamamoto in her *powerless creature keeps going...*; Photo by Kathryn Butler

Molly Ross and Nola Sporn Smith, aka [MOLLY/NOLA](#), have a sense of humor and energy to spare. They begin their piece, *Steer*, by adopting a symmetrical pose seated face to face with their feet over each other's shoulders. Thus suspended, they experience a rare moment of calm. Once the stall-gates open (metaphorically speaking), this dance will offer a wild ride, rocking and bucking like a rodeo event.

Whimsically incorporating the sounds of a livestock auction, complete with the auctioneer's chant and the lowing and bleating of our hooved friends, this slice of Americana extracts the bouncy rhythms from ranch work. It also recalls the coaxing and determined effort required to manage animals who have minds of their own. Ross and Sporn Smith trot and pump their arms. They toss their heads and butt against each other's shoulders, hard. When Sporn Smith collapses, Ross turns the body with her foot; and later Ross presses down on Sporn Smith's head. Finally they get religion. To the flat tones of [Sacred Harp](#) singing, the dancers subside, returning to their original symmetry. Discovering a gem like *Steer* is what Performance Mix is all about.

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