



Rob Fordeyn, Stephen Thompson, and Ondrej Vidlar in Trajal Harrell's *Antigone, Sr.* (L).
(Photo: Ian Douglas.)

AMERICAN REALNESS. Curated by Thomas Benjamin Snapp Pryor. Abrons Arts Center and PS 1, New York City. 10–20 January 2013.

Among New York's annual performance-festival cavalcade, the American Realness (AR) festival was the scrappy downtown option for dancegoers seeking experimental performance when it was founded in 2009. Four years later, AR has emerged as a leading venue for some of the most exciting work in American dance, making it an ideal site at which to consider the relationship between contemporary dance and the still incredibly powerful twentieth-century modern/postmodern dance canon.

Twentieth-century dance modernism often emphasized form (albeit to different ends), asking audiences to pay attention to the shapes that dancers made with their bodies. Much of the postmodern dance of the late twentieth century critiqued modernist choreographers' often-virtuosic emphasis on physical form, expanding the range of physical actions that could count as interesting shapes for dancers to assume.

AR's 2013 presentation of well-known and mid-career experimental choreographers suggested that

postmodern dance's exploration of the quotidian—in both movement vocabulary and performers' affect—remains central. One festival standout, Jeanine Durning's solo *inging*, clearly tracked in this refusal of visual spectacle, layering dance and language to make audiences question how they pay attention to bodies in motion. But postmodern dance's refusal to engage with expressiveness, epitomized in Yvonne Rainer's 1964 "No Manifesto," has greatly lessened. Many AR choreographers, often performing in their own creations, toyed with engaging the audience and their fellow performers in an affective exchange; they shifted the emotional charge within the theatre by emphasizing performance qualities that could be called "energy" or "presence." Rather than attending to the particularities of what the body does as the audience's entry point into the work, choreographers like Miguel Gutierrez, Jennifer Monson, and Trajal Harrell brought audiences into heightened states of attention that made even the most pedestrian actions seem spiritually or even erotically charged. These artists moved through and past postmodernism's refusal of visual spectacle, finding different possibilities for what spectacle might mean in simple gestures and on bare stages.

Among the works included in the festival, Harrell's *Antigone, Sr. (L)*, performed at the Abrons Arts Center, and *M2M (Made to Measure)*, presented at PS 1, most explicitly confronted the relationship between dance history and contemporary dance-making. Harrell describes the series that includes both pieces as an imagined meeting between the 1960s postmodern Judson Church dance scene and Harlem's voguing ballroom community. Arguing that this "historical impossibility" (as Harrell calls it) would have had multiple outcomes, he created multiple works, labeling each by size: XS, S, M, L, XL, and M2M (made to measure). In each iteration, Harrell and his stunning casts of male dancers question how attention to race and communities beyond the iconic postmoderns—the Judson Dance scene—shifts what counts as postmodern dance today.

Antigone, Sr. (L) redefined what constitutes a large dance in its level of spectacle. The almost three-hour, intermission-less extravaganza had multiple elements, including a range of solo voguing performances; several slow, speaking sections; and a large-scale though surprisingly bare-boned set. The principle of DIY queer performance aesthetics—that everyday objects can be transformed into imaginative fantasy—was taken up as a choreographic compositional mantra. The work began with a series of solos featuring beautiful men who loosely borrowed from voguing's extravagant arm gestures. Over time, the solos layered and commented rhythmically on one another. Later, Harrell and Thibault Lac sat on a mattress, drawing out a list of oddly patched-together pop-culture references: "We are *Girls*." "We are Mary Kate and Ashley." The men's recitation became less about what they said and more about the control they exercised over the confused though engrossed audience. Harrell compelled the audience to join him in *Antigone's* alchemy when, mid-work, he sent several dancers climbing through the audience carrying individual strands of white twine from the stage to the back of the theatre. Once the dancers completed their task, Harrell, seated onstage, raised his hands, to which all the strings had been tied. As the white lines rose above the audience, slicing the room into pieces, Harrell became not just *Antigone's* choreographer, but also its master and magician.

Harrell's ability to compose voguing's vocabulary into entrancingly beautiful sequences propelled *Antigone, Sr. (L)*. In vogue balls, which originated in queer African American groups known as "houses," vogue competitions are divided into several categories in which dancers vie to best embody a category of queer community (butch queen, for instance) or simultaneously embody and critique a category of dominant (straight) society (executive realness, for instance). Harrell masterfully retells *Antigone's*

Greek mythology through imaginative vogue categories: a parade of the all-male cast in splendid, yet surprisingly mournful drag becomes the category "mother realness," a reference to voguing's play with the idea of "being real." *Antigone* climaxes in a booming dance party, where cast members catwalk with fierceness—a fantastic if obvious choice. The section that followed, however, exemplified that *Antigone* was more than a superficial celebration of voguing. Dancers appeared in the barest, but silkiest, of light (designed by Jan Maerten), their forms barely visible: part ghost, part shadow, all feeling. The pop music playlist that propelled the entire show played softly, but the light and gliding dancing conjured hushed silence—the buzzing silence peculiar to the moment of stepping out of a party into a vacant urban nightscape. Whereas the voguing men in the silky light became beautiful as light bathed their dancing forms, Harrell, throughout *Antigone*, returned to an offstage, unlit corner to dance. His form registered more as energy than shape. We saw his pleasure in dancing, but we could not really see him dancing; his virtuosity was not for us, but for him. Harrell's choice to remove himself from the visual spectacle seemed a comment on race that was interestingly interlaced with a sense of loss and loneliness that hovered around *Antigone's* edges.

If *Antigone, Sr. (L)* felt touched by loss, then *M2M* was overwhelmed by grief. It embodied a person fighting to avoid coming undone, which seemed to be, in part, a result of *M2M's* exceptional status in the Judson series. Harrell said that most of the *Judson/Paris is Burning* series imagined uptown voguers coming to Judson, but *M2M* envisioned the reverse: the mostly white Judson dancers going up to Harlem. In *M2M*, a trio for the white-skinned Lac and Ondrej Vidlar and African American Harrell, Harrell sat almost still, leaning across a chair, making only tiny adjustments in posture. When he finally rose, he quickly composed himself into a fierce voguing man: he moaned, cried, and sweat—a journey from agony, to grief, to extreme labor.

Whereas Harrell's work enveloped and productively overwhelmed the audience in its visual and affective spectacle, Gutierrez's *Storing the Winter* demanded that the audience engage with him. In the solo, Gutierrez gazed so intently—somehow both simultaneously at the audience and into himself—that the air became weighty. The only nod toward levity was the sparkling, bright blue eyelash he wore on one eye, inserting quick winks and twitches into the intense scene. Jaime Fennelly's music, a combination of haunting melody and electronic reverb emitted from the electronic harmonium he played onstage, poured sound into the space to the point of overflow. Gutierrez, wearing jeans and T-shirt, mainly walked and ran and then stopped to spiral



Jeanine Durning in *inging*. (Photo: Ian Douglas.)

around his body's axis or fall to the floor and roll. His exact steps mattered less than how the music and motion made the larger environment feel—full, dense, and blue. Even that dash of glitter on Gutierrez's eye seemed heavy by the piece's end.

Unlike Gutierrez and Harrell, Monson's choreographic contributions date back by decades. Her *Live Dancing Archive* offered the best example of how a postmodern refusal of spectacle transcends the idea

that the visual is the only way that audiences and performers can engage with dance. Monson is an amazingly clear dancer, but it was the intensity she exuded in performance that captured the audience. Presented as an excerpt from a work in progress, this collaboration among Monson, lighting designer Joe Levasseur, sound designer Jeff Kolar, and video artist Robin Vachal lasted barely thirty minutes. As part of the festival's "Show-and-Tell" series, Monson introduced the piece and led a discussion in which

she described the lengthy creative process. The piece, which premiered at The Kitchen last February and will tour during 2013–14, archives *Bird Brain*, Monson's past project that follows animal migrations down the North and South American coasts. *Live Dancing Archive* gives *Bird Brain* continued life through three avenues: Monson's solo is a remixing of choreography she learned from video-documentation of years of *Bird Brain* dancing; Vachal created a video installation from the same documentation; and there is also an online digital tool.

These three modes of archiving the past extend the argument that dance has many sensorial layers. Even though AR only included an excerpt from *Live Dancing Archive*, Monson's choreography, Levasseur's lights, and Kolar's sound met, rather than merged, in the solo. For instance, when Monson stood still at the work's beginning, her profile was just enough to suggest that the horizontal light, which Levasseur created by walking onstage during the performance and adjusting parts of the minimal set, might be a sunrise or sunset. Kolar sat onstage, mixing AM radio frequencies—alternately distorted and soothing—that surrounded Monson's dancing. Amid this soundscape, Monson seemed to gather the light, sound, and *Bird Brain's* choreographic history into herself, her movements so full that her body, clothed in only a fur chestplate and brown fishnet stockings, threatened to come apart at its joints as she danced. She always stuttered just on the edge of control, whether exploding through awkward jumps or carefully rolling through her feet. Finally, she crouched and faced the audience, eyes full, and a change from human to animal seemed imminent. The birth of a new creature seemed a fitting outcome to the question of what it means to house an archive in a dancing body.

Durning's *inging* was among the festival's most bare works—more a lecture/demonstration than theatre, and it was also one of AR's most subtle works in its reimagining of postmodern dance's refusal of the audience's gaze. Throughout the solo, Durning shifted the relationship between the words she said and the way she moved to eventually reveal mundane movement's potential for beauty. Watching *inging* was like taking a class in how to develop the capacity to be astonished.

Durning began the piece seated behind a table as a silent, three-paneled video of herself talking screened behind her. The live Durning then lectured with descriptions so obvious—for example, "I am sitting behind a table"—that they verged on nonsensical. As she stood and circled the table, she continued to talk, first listing descriptions of her actions, then naming associations among objects, ideas, and people that always stopped just short

of metaphor (a "hole in the center of the earth" leads to capitalism, then to Steve Jobs). She started to leave the table as she told a story (a tale about being a Catholic schoolgirl told to close her legs). The accumulated effect of Durning's talking shifted focus from what she said to how she said it: she literally pushed words from her body. The propulsion foregrounded the action of speaking while the monotonous words faded into the background. When Durning finally moved—always pedestrian or functional choices, such as climbing over a barrier in the audience's space—it seemed as though she was giving the audience a new opportunity, a new chance to look at her body after having kept it so backgrounded through the rest of the piece. She still spoke, but her words were clearly marked as what should be overlooked, in favor of a body—an effect that brought the AR audience into a hushed, still silence that seemed unbreakable. Durning actually had to tell the audience they could leave when she finished.

Throughout AR, performances asked big questions. Choreographers and performers reimagined decades-old debates about spectacle, bodies, and motion while also disrupting the dance community's obsession with the twentieth century. That is what makes this work central to American dance today, and what makes American Realness, slated to return in January 2014, essential to contemporary dance.

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MIES JULIE. By August Strindberg. Adapted and directed by Yael Farber. Baxter Theatre Centre. St. Ann's Warehouse, New York City. 4 December 2012.

EASTER. By August Strindberg. Adapted and directed by Robert Greer. August Strindberg Repertory Theatre. Gene Frankel Theatre, New York City. 14 March 2013.

THE DANCE OF DEATH. By August Strindberg. Adapted by Mike Poulton. Directed by Joseph Hardy. Red Bull Theater. Lucille Lortel Theatre, New York City. 23 April 2013.

Recent interest in Strindberg's work, including the formation of the August Strindberg Repertory Theatre and its inaugural production in 2012, could be at least partly attributed to the centenary of Strindberg's death in 2012. But the centenary does not explain the viral popularity of Eun-Ha Paek,