

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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VOICE

ANYTHING CAN GO: OFFBEAT BROOKLYN PRESENTER CROSSES THE RIVER

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Chez Bushwick, the performance cooperative established in 2002 in the Brooklyn loft shared by two choreographer-performers, Jonah Bokaer and Jeremy Wade, and composer-musician Loren Dempster, is branching out. The monthly Shtudio Shows that Miguel Gutierrez began curating at the loft in 2004 provided a hotbed for experiments in dance and other forms of performance; you could trek out to this cool place and sample the new and the edgy for \$5. But crowds and landlords don't always mix. So, in collaboration with nine other Brooklyn spaces, Chez Bushwick has inaugurated a series of AMBUSH events. And this October, the organization crossed over into Manhattan (gasp!) to present Bokaer and Moving Theater at the Henry Street Playhouse's Abrons Arts Center.

In this little proscenium theater attached to the Henry Street Settlement House, back in the 1950s, Alwin Nikolais perfected his magical blend of sound, light, and dancers. It's fitting that Bokaer, who works in digital media (as well as dancing in Merce Cunningham's company), should display more contemporary forms of illusion that transform and dissect the human body.

His *Charade* starts out very concretely with Bokaer sitting on a chair facing the audience. He takes an apple from a handy music stand and solemnly eats it, including the core. Blackout. For his next act, with careful, controlled movements, he tilts and turns himself and an open Mac laptop into a variety of relationships (including placing it on his back in a position similar to one Cunningham once managed with a strapped-on chair.) These acts of digesting and gestating announce the ensuing amalgam of video and digital animation built on human movement. Bokaer shows us a human hand rotating on a human arm; when the black animated mannequin demonstrates the same gesture, his hand seems to turn completely, like the spinning head in *The Exorcist*. Whatever this unnerving figure can do looks reassuringly normal when performed by a live dancer. Bokaer has skillfully organized and intercut images that present and re-present the human body. On camera, he dances with sensors attached to his body—a stage in the motion capture process that produced the limber black figure, a red stick figure, and a striding green (or was it blue?) homunculus with bulbous joints.

In a press release, Bokaer explains that his [*underscore*] is "adapted to the unique architecture and acoustics of the venue." I don't fully understand the intricacies of the process, but I can hear that the voices of four singers from the Collective Opera Company (Adriana Chavez, Jon Pratt, Paula White, and the company's director, Ryan Tracy) resound gorgeously through the space, as they interpret a centuries-old chant in Aramaic. The vocalists are part of an installation that includes projected video footage. It is they who take video cassettes from a row of monitors (which may or may not have malfunctioned at the performance I attended), station themselves at the four corners of the stage, and carefully pull out the tape from each; they've somehow attached the tape across the space, so that, as they unreel, they create a brown web above the dancers. The movements performed by Banu Ogan, Davon Rainey, and Liz Sargent have been generated by the digital tool, DanceForms 1.0, and transferred, via Bokaer, to their living bodies.

The four move with cool, spare precision in a world defined by the magical floating voices and the shining brown weave of tape. They lie down and slide along the floor as light pipes descend from above to within about five feet of the floor. When the dancers stand, their territory is defined by the pipes into avenues. Bokaer writes that his way of situating human beings in a "built domain of digital media. . .[creates] a loss of continuity as the work progresses." That lack of continuity is

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true and inevitably lifelike, as those who follow Merce Cunningham's choreography know. But we do tend to sense the possibility of causality and yearn for influence. Near the end, the singers

grasp the ends of the pipes and start them swinging. It's a lovely, challenging effect, with some pipes swinging right to left, others left to right. Suddenly, I want something to change in the dance, to acknowledge this event—not in terms of drama but in terms of the altered environment. Bokaer's onto something (actually, a lot of things), and I look forward to seeing his work as it develops.

The nine members of Moving Theater who take over the place for *Mass Particle N. 1 [mass entertainment]*, announce themselves from the get-go as a bunch of clever, amiable zanies. Once the musicians of the International Contemporary Ensemble—David Schotzko and Nathan Davis, percussion (mostly tin cans and bottles); Jacob Greenberg, piano; and Eric Lamb, radio- have taken their places, the actor-dancers start racing furiously around, freezing into various group plastiques and individual poses. The piece— choreographed and directed by the group's leaders, Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, with input from the performers—has the look of a series of skits dreamed up for an impromptu performance by some smart friends. Jonathan Drillet and Thea Little build images of a tender machine with their athletics. Elyse Sparks and Benjamin Evans, after a rough-and-tumble encounter in and out of one of the side doorways into the theater, play audience members more excited by the fact that they're sitting next to a probable celebrity (Natalie Thomas) than they are for the ongoing avant-garde performance they're supposedly watching (Drillet and Hadley B. Nunes who stand on big fake rocks and barely move). After Drillet and Emilio Martinez-Lopez have tried a number of strategies (like climbing the proscenium), they stand on the "stones" and pour water over themselves. It turns out that the hands passing the water bottles through another side door belong to Collective Opera Company members Tracy and Chavez in 18th-century attire (well, we did just hear some Mozart). What else? Well, Sparks, as a red-nosed clown, knocks herself out trying to give the tall, model-thin Thomas, who's weeping noisily, the confidence to perform again. Ashley Searles leads the pack into some dancing. Danny Gittelman rises from the front row in a rage and roughhouses with Martinez-Lopez. Near the end, everyone lines up and lists what each wants most. I prefer the true craziness of the very last moment. The elegantly dressed pair sit on chairs facing us; between them sits a nearly naked man. All stare forward, unmoving, exhibiting subtle signs of discomfort and confusion, as the curtain slowly, slowly, slowly descends.

Chez Bushwick embraces all kinds of performance. Bokaer's brainy concept and experiments in dehumanization and the somewhat ragged rambunctious antics of these playful folks set each other off in ways more satisfying than you might imagine.

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