

Yanira Castro's "Dark Horse/Black Forest"

by Carrie Stern
September 2009

Fingers slip into the top of black underwear, thumbs hook over the band, knees bend; a man and woman swing their legs "in, out, lunge" her leg hooks his. They have been fighting. Their faces dull with the look that comes at the end of too much angry passion; their tango is ferocious, passionate, tender. We, the voyeurs, peer from corners, from inside stalls, hugging walls as their ardent ballet plays out in the bathroom of New York's Gershwin Hotel.

This out-of-place tango in this most unlikely place ends Yanira Castro's wonderfully surprising "Dark Horse/Black Forest." There are actually two duets: an all-male duet with Luke Miller and Darrin Wright, and this mixed gender duet performed by Heather Olson and Joseph Poulson. Both, and particularly Olson and Poulson, are deeply focused, intense, the performers inhabit their personas pulling you into their world. There is no way to separate yourself; you are the voyeur watching as personal lives unfold.



Photography by Julieta Cervantes

The structure of the two duets is identical. A man enters the bathroom after calling to his partner who has already entered. Primping, playing with an old-fashioned cassette player, hair washing, fighting, making up while feeding and smearing each other with a whipped cream and strawberry cake, and finally, the tango. The interpretation of the dance's phrases differs with the performers. Anyone who has a brother will recognize the puppy-like quality of sections of the male duet. The male/female duet has moments as sweet as an impressionist painting. Both have uncomfortable sections of couple-like physical and vocal negotiating. The implicit violence made some audience members physically recoil, as if the physical actions were real, not danced. Both have moments of tender, luscious movement suggesting a deep, soft intimacy.

That the emotion reads true, that such an intimate space, in little more than a half hour can hold so rich an experience is remarkable.

The bathroom "a typical hotel bathroom painted bright red/orange, sparklingly clean, with one stall-door removed so the audience can peer into the space" corrals Castro's movement in odd corners. The fight takes place by the sink, the cake-eating/make-up in a far corner, the tango and other encounters in the space outside the stall. The movement is quirky "tiny explicit gestures, wrenching pulls of limbs and torso, and lovely lyrical lifts and twinnings. You cannot just watch "you crowd along a wall of urinals, water gets splashed, it lands on you. Dancers move to a new space, you move in their wake. At one point, the performers, as if meeting you in the hall, silently direct the audience to step elsewhere. Your body becomes part of the performance "twisting, craning, leaning" this involvement of the body of the audience is, or course, part of why a choreographer would choose such a close space, forcing the audience to engage the physicality of the performers. The

performers never acknowledge their audience even when interacting. Our role as voyeur is necessary; however, we are the witness to this moment in their life. In so doing, we reflect on our own.

Two high video monitors play what appears to be feed from a hotel room. Castro, Marya Wethers and David Sangalli, in a second performance, enter, drop their bags and remove coats. Over the course of the video—longer than the live performance—the performers enter the bathroom, get ready for bed, and watch T.V. sitting near each other. They undress to t-shirts and black underwear, jump on the bed. One by one they crawl under the covers, cuddle together. After awhile Castro starts to kick her legs, then, as if they don't know the camera is still running, they sit up and chat. The video appears to be in real time, it is not. Surveillance cameras in the bathroom appear to be real, but are not. At performance times hotel guests can call up a version of the performance on room televisions as if watching the performance on closed circuit (which they are not). These versions only look real, adding both a layer of voyeurism and mystery of verity.

Bathrooms are the space in which we are most often alone, space that is private even when public, space that hides us and in which we reveal our most human self. In choosing a public bathroom for a "private" dance, Castro, in addition to the questions already raised, suggests something about the nature of the public and private in our own lives.

Ancillary "performances" by artist Lauren McCarthy—titled "OverHere"—and writer Rozalia Jovanovic's "darkbloom8" and "doghebitdme" were less successful, though no less intriguing. McCarthy mounted two speakers embedded in "listening tubes," for lack of a better name, on the wall of the Gershwin's lobby. Audience members were invited to listen in. Each speaker played audio streams of the text of Jovanovic's Twitter feed. The catch, you only heard half the conversation. The listening was intriguing—I tried running between the two and interaction was clearly part of the point, but somehow the language was out of place in the lobby and didn't pull me in. I also occasionally followed the Twitter feed on line. Jovanovic's entries are cryptic and enticing, but I never cared about the characters the way I did the characters the performers created, though it certainly was an interesting lead-in to Castro's piece and suggests that there is much to experiment with in online performance.