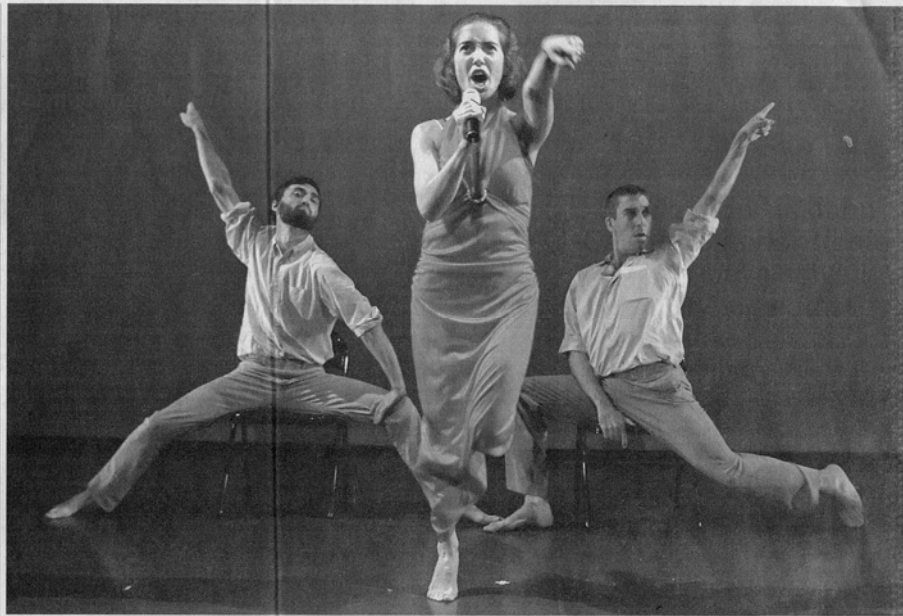


# The New York Times

## DANCE REVIEW

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By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO



Jessica Anthony with Sean Donovan, left, and Peter Sciscioli in Jane Comfort's new work, "An American Rendition," which has quotations from public figures.

### *Reality TV Meets Torture Meets Cheney Meets Heidi Klum*

Members of the Bush White House who are or will shortly be out of their jobs might consider switching careers. What about the arts? It's not such a stretch: just look at how many contemporary practitioners are already building works around the administration's words and policies.

Jane Comfort, for example, gives Donald Rumsfeld a text credit in "An American Rendition," her new dance-theater piece. And her program includes a quotation from Dick Cheney that begins, "We'll have to work sort of the dark side, if you will."

Most people probably won't recall this line, uttered on the Sept. 16, 2001, edition of "Meet the Press." It's not nearly so identifiable as, say, the supermodel Heidi Klum's weekly "Project Runway" pronouncement: "As you know, in fashion one day you're in, and the next day you're out."

This discrepancy in knowledge is precisely Ms. Comfort's point. The Klum quotation is also in the program, right there with the vice president's words. In the hourlong work itself, which had its premiere last week at the Duke on 42nd Street, sinister riffs on reality television are spliced with torture scenes. The performers — who sing, act and dance — alternate between portraying vacuous contestants and brutal captors.

At one point a dancer morphs from a ruthless government interrogator into a dull-eyed channel surfer gazing expressionlessly at an imaginary screen as his victim limps off the stage, which is flooded in red light. The accusatory implication is clear: a citizenry's apathy enables a country's policies.

This is not, of course, a new appraisal, and it isn't easy, when critiquing a vast entrenched system, to maintain your sense of nuance. Ms. Comfort's muscular, often violent physical language is unsettlingly evocative, but she paints with a broad brush in the text-based characterizations. And not all of her company members are strong enough actors to deliver portraits of substance. (Sean Donovan, however, is terrific, as both a catty contestant and an American torture victim breaking down under harrowing treatment.)

More intriguing is the way Ms. Comfort conflates government bureaucracy and reality television as dizzying, pointless, inhumane systems marked by conformity, stereotypes and black-and-white codes of conduct. The airline passengers do whatever it takes to get through opaque security rules; the captor learns to call his abuser "Sir"; the television contestants never question the rules that govern them — until, like Ms. Comfort's American citizens, they come afoul of the reality they have helped shape.