

## Dance Theater in Small Spaces

by Mary Hodges

“Get out! Get out get out! *GET OUT!*” He’s yelling this right next to me, in a bathroom at full capacity with a just handful of people inside. Should I go? But I’m part of the audience—he doesn’t *really* mean me. No, no, he’s shouting at his lover, and I’m just pressed against the wall, watching their relationship unravel.



Yanira Castro’s “Dark Horse / Black Forest”. Photo Credit: Julieta Cervantes.

In one cast, he is Joseph Poulson, yelling at Heather Olson. “I’m gonna take a piss—get out!” Icily, she leaves. I’m terrified, though; I am practically between him and the urinal, but not so much that I’d actually have to move if he does decide to use it. It was one thing when his hair brushed against me, but I don’t know if I’m ready for this level of intimacy. For the next few excruciating moments, I weigh the discomfort of standing right next to Poulson peeing against the option of moving awkwardly away, distracting everyone from the “real” show. I really don’t want to be that person who shows up to an unconventional performance, set in a bathroom, then can’t even handle a little urination. My heart is racing, and I’m having the most intense relationship to a performance that I’ve ever had.

There’s another cast, and in that he is Luke Miller. Right after he and Darrin Wright have nearly wrestled each other out the door, he screams, “Get out!” Fortunately, I’ve seen this show before. I know I’m not going anywhere, he’s not talking to me, and (thank God!) he’s not about to take a piss. Briefly, the tension will hold, then it will simmer down and we’ll all have a little rest to breathe. But I’m wrong. In this version, Miller keeps building our anxiety, pacing and yelling, and I start to wonder if he might do something actually violent. He comes at us, arm raised, looking right into our eyes. “Get out!” The young woman in front of me, uninitiated to this production, utters, “Oh my God!” before she books it out of there. I follow, since this is clearly not going where I thought it was. Down the hall, Wright is huddled in a much smaller, single-use bathroom, the door ajar, muttering his complaints about Miller, who is now whistling eerily from the room we just left.

This is Yanira Castro's *Dark Horse/Black Forest*, and it's gripping, scary, adrenaline-producing work. I walked away from it with the kind of thrill you might get from doing something totally crazy with a stranger. It feels dangerous. There's that intensity of not knowing what will come next, the intimacy, immediacy, physicality, and emotional suggestion—and the utter impossibility of being able to recreate that rush with words. Roller coasters have nothing on this.

On the one hand, Castro is overtly exploring our voyeuristic sides. We are *close* to these performers, and we're watching them fight, dance, undress, and caress. There's no given back-story, but we piece one together based on what we see (a wronged and a wrongdoer, for sure, but is the wrongdoer really wrong?). This is the same narrative illusion that feeds the tabloid market and has created a whole business of spying on strangers. But here, live, viewers are exposed in a way that we never are when we watch reality shows, or even when we see traditional performance set in darkened theaters. The lights are on so we cannot ignore the presence of others watching, and we see ourselves in C. Merritt Houghton's mirror installations. Further, the objects of our gaze look back at us. One especially powerful moment happens during the couple's ending reconciliation, when, after all that we've been through together, one dancer brings the other a cake. They eat it, cuddling on the floor, then kiss. Slowly, they turn to make eye contact with us, producing—in me at least—severe embarrassment.

But the intruding eye is just the tip of this venture. *Dark Horse/Black Forest* is a full contact, highly sensory event. The strange claustrophobia of it has the same heightening effect of a blindfold: magnifying every sound coming from outside, the heat, and the just-cleaned-bathroom smell. I am acutely aware of every structure in the small space, each intrusion of stall door, urinal, sink, mirror, fluorescent bulb (they line the walls thanks to lighting designer Kathy Couch). We are in this performance in a devastatingly obvious way. Performers don't just break the fourth wall, they reach through it and touch you.