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CRITIC'S PICK

Review: She's the Dancing Body, He's the Restless Mind

Monica Bill Barnes and Robbie Saenz de Viteri ring in the New Year in their physical and introspective “Many Happy Returns.”

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Monica Bill Barnes and Robbie Saenz de Viteri in “Many Happy Returns” at Playwrights Horizons. Credit...Paula Lobo

There is plenty of text in “Many Happy Returns,” but dance, the language of the body — presented here as intentional and slyly forthright — is just as critical as the words. The main character, who never speaks but does, in one moment, sing a Billy Joel song in flat a cappella, is Monica Bill Barnes. But is it really her?

In this partially improvised work at Playwrights Horizons by the artistic team of Barnes and Robbie Saenz de Viteri, Barnes, the dancer and choreographer, isn’t just playing herself. Her character is a hybrid of its creators.

Barnes plays the woman’s body — with its silent-movie allure as it navigates space in sinewy and dewy ways — and Saenz de Viteri, speaking throughout, is her mind. Through movement and text, the character’s insecurities and joy spill out for all to feel and see. “She’s a woman who carries herself with total clarity, a clarity she might not even always exactly feel,” Saenz de Viteri says. That seems right.

Bach, Blondie and Judy Garland are part of the lively soundtrack that helps usher in the New Year. Flowers are handed out, a prewritten toast is made by an audience member. We cheer her on. “Many Happy Returns” winds along many paths until it arrives, joyfully, at its sweeping final

dance to “(Nothing but) Flowers” by Talking Heads. It seems loose — with the jovial air of a live podcast — yet its freedom clearly comes from its unyielding structure and detail.

At its essence, “Many Happy Returns” is an experiment in the art of camaraderie and connection, of strangers finding community in a broken world. “I should also say I will play someone else, there’s going to be a moment when I play one of you actually and then there will be a moment when one of you has to play one of us,” Saenz de Viteri says. “So we’re all in this together.”

This production — admission is free — takes place in a space dressed up as if for a dance in a school gymnasium. At the seemingly casual start, Barnes arranges pitchers and vases of flowers; Saenz de Viteri sits behind a small table and computer and sets the scene: “There’s some dread in the air this year for sure,” he says. “Maybe a little bit of joy? I don’t know.”

But this performance, he says, will be “kind of a party.” As the mind of this production, Saenz de Viteri is also its amiable host, easygoing and loose from the start. Early on, he asks to borrow a hat from an audience member, which on Thursday turned out to be a fedora more suited to summer and made of paper. Its back story — the hat was purchased during a trip to Italy — comes up later in the show when Saenz de Viteri weaves a tale about it inspired by his off-the-cuff exchange with its wearer. Another happy return is this: He takes the banal and makes it riveting.

And Barnes, riding on the quick impulses of her physicality, matches his verbal adroitness as she springs to life, trying to find her footing as she stumbles and triumphs along her sometimes merry, sometimes clueless way. She is in control, but beneath the surface you sense self-doubt; for her, dancing is an armor, where she seems most secure.

This is more than believable as Barnes strings together seemingly simple movements — flapping a leg on repeat, spinning with freedom and force, snapping her fingers with glee — whipping from one direction to the next like a gale wind. Her expression, flickering between warmth and deadpan blankness, is another kind of armor, a mask. “Her face wasn’t always telling everyone how she felt about everything,” Saenz de Viteri says, “the way mine always is.”

But she finds solace when dancing with three friends from her past — Mykel Marai Nairne, Indah Mariana and Flannery Gregg — who appear and disappear through doors at the back of the stage. In these duets, the dancers balance rolled yoga mats on their heads, strut back and forth to “Let Your Love Flow” by the Bellamy Brothers and lip-sync to “Islands in the Stream.” In each, they’re twins bound by movement.

Near the end, Saenz de Viteri says: “It might be a good idea to move. There’s a chance I think that talking doesn’t actually make all of us feel better.”

As a full force of four, they spread out on the dance floor to Blondie’s “Dreaming.” Movement, we learned earlier in the piece, may not be permanent, but its afterimage is lasting. And, just like the cost of admission for this show, dreaming, courtesy of Blondie, is free.