

The New York Times

Review: ‘Happy Hour’ Hosts a Make-Believe Office Party

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- Oct. 27, 2015

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/28/arts/dance/review-happy-hour-hosts-a-make-believe-office-party.html>

Pretzels, beer and karaoke greeted visitors to a Lower Manhattan dance studio last Wednesday evening. The occasion was “Happy Hour,” a new weekly shindig choreographed by Monica Bill Barnes, who seems to have been inspired by the question “What if a dance show masqueraded as an office party?”

Ms. Barnes and Anna Bass have been on the road lately with the more high-profile “[Three Acts, Two Dancers, One Radio Host](#),” a storytelling revue starring Ira Glass of “This American Life” on public radio. (Mr. Glass was in the audience last week.) “Happy Hour” foregrounds the spunky partnership between the women, which took a back seat, though an entertaining one, in “Three Acts.”

Dressed in suits, ties and bowler hats, Ms. Barnes and Ms. Bass play a cross between themselves and a pair of hapless businessmen, teaming up to flirt relentlessly with the audience. It’s a mostly wordless pursuit. Though they occasionally mutter, whisper, shout or sing, these are characters built through movement — a pithy mash-up of debonair jazz-tap ditties, stereotypically masculine gestures, exaggerated facial expressions and athletic slapstick — aided by tunes like “Build Me Up Buttercup” and “[Hurts So Good](#).”

As the audience filters in to the unremarkable room — a studio at [Gibney Dance: Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center](#) — the gregarious Robert Saenz de Viteri, playing host, dispenses raffle tickets and free drinks from a rolling kiosk while nudging guests toward the karaoke machine.

No sooner does he dash out for a fresh bag of popcorn than Ms. Barnes and Ms. Bass arrive. Defensively slouching, hands stuffed in their pockets, they size up the room. How will they navigate a party that’s started without them?

The two are winning as would-be studs, who, beneath their fist pumping and chest bumping and fanatical jogging, are desperately, awkwardly alone. One lucky (or

unlucky) audience member becomes the object of hip-thrusting desire, ultimately disappearing through the “staff only” door with a self-satisfied Ms. Bass. That leaves Ms. Barnes, momentarily solo, to regale us with a card trick that she hasn’t quite mastered.

The swing between toughness and vulnerability, triumphing and tripping up loses its punch around the third quarter of “Happy Hour.” The same joke replays a few too many times. But it’s still a joyful respite from the 9-to-5 grind or whatever your grind may be. If office parties are meant to boost morale, this one does its job.

“Happy Hour” continues on Wednesdays only through Dec. 16, Studio G, Gibney Dance: Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center, 280 Broadway, Manhattan; 646-837-6809, monicabillbarnes.com.

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 28, 2015, Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Two Insecure Guys at an Office Party Try Hitting On the Audience, and It Works. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)