

American Realness, Abrons Arts Center, New York – review

Most of the opening shows in this festival were united in their disregard for dance

By Apollinaire Scherr

Published January 14, 2014

Even if the avant-garde is dead, the new still emerges small and obscure. So a few years ago New York performing arts producers did us a favour. They dedicated the early, quiet weeks of January to tightly packed festivals of the cutting-edge. Under the Radar, Coil, and American Realness run day and night, each with its own take on the arrestingly fresh.

Five-year-old American Realness, on the Lower East Side, announces its aesthetic in its name. “Realness” alludes to the drag art of seeming to be what you are not – a dame, say, or straight. The term plays with notions of the natural and authentic. In previous years, so did the shows. They yoked flaming artifice to aching aspiration, and turned pop pleasures to subversive ends. Maybe they will again, this

week, when the festival rolls out another half dozen works. Most of the opening offerings, however, did not mess with conventional categories so much as glumly reinforce them. In place of irony, we got cynicism; in place of knowingness, naivety. Instead of celebrating the new, the festival confirmed how entrenched a dead-end trend towards “raw” expression, instigated nearly a decade ago, has grown.



Michelle Boulé in *WONDER*

Whatever creator-performers Ishmael Houston-Jones and Emily Wexler meant to do with the playlist of their *13 Love Songs: dot dot dot* – argue with the lyrics? act them out? ignore them? – they did establish that pop songs were bad and love was good. This moral dichotomy between form and feeling ran through the shows I saw. Order, organisation and certainly choreography counted as oppressive and therefore fake, while drooling, screaming, crawling, contorting, panting and thudding to the floor like a brick were deemed honest and true. Sometimes, though, a performer is better than his ideas: with *Love Songs*, Houston-Jones, a riveting veteran improviser, managed to be simultaneously sarcastic and dead serious, helpless and adamant, sexy and ridiculous.

The shows tended to treat theatre as a tool for soft social critique – so soft as to disintegrate before the hour was up. Adrienne Truscott’s backstageer . . . *Too Freedom* . . . compared performer to day labourer, with the choreographer prancing and twirling like a gymnast as three men in jeans built a plywood wall around a towering blue tepee. Meanwhile, sound engineer Neal Medlyn produced sounds – from throat-clearing to yelping – and a sullen tea and roast-chicken party transpired downstage. Tepee, tea party, teapot: the free association school of theatre. As for Canadian Dana Michel’s *Yellow Towel*, did this wan impersonation of a drooling, palsied Rastafarian layabout and weatherman mean to skewer bigoted stereotypes or satirise the very skewering? Whatever the murky conceit, the shows were united in their disregard for dance. Fine for playwright Tina Satter’s winning, spooky farce *House of Dance*, where dance served as an apt metaphor for corny American can-doism. But why would choreographers – Michel, Truscott and the rest – put themselves at such a remove from their idiom? Why the contempt without even the pay-off of familiarity?

Michelle Boulé’s affecting solo *Wonder* concurs that, thanks to reality TV, dance has come to represent sweaty aspiration. But, besides falling and stuttering and standing self-consciously still, Boulé really danced, sometimes with outlandish tricky virtuosity, sometimes with modern-dance inwardness. Dance was no longer just a stand-in for something else. Plus, the shape-shifting, character-sifting solo was driven less by complaint than by deep questions. It asked, for example, what a dancer’s conception of dancing – whether as armour, medium or confessional – had to do with her relationship with the audience. For once, dance was not the enemy. With *Wonder* there was no enemy.