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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Whitney Brewer

Getting Lost and Not Found in *Thank You For Coming: Play*

by Hannah Salzer

Faye Driscoll's *Thank You For Coming: Play* begins without a call to order. Doors open half an hour before the scheduled start time, allowing audience members to enter leisurely and gather around a white cardboard platform on the theater floor. Audience members glance around uncertainly, as if looking for confirmation that they are in the right place, doing the proper thing. Ambling around the space, performers crouch to lead small groups of audience members in vocal exercises of incantations and nonsense sounds. They do not silence the rest of us; people continue to converse and laugh, sometimes reacting to the micro-performances, sometimes not. The unscored voicing cuts the scored. Two conversations collide and rebound, like an image and its mirror reflection. Through these gates, the dance emerges.

Play, performed at Philadelphia's FringeArts last weekend, is the second installment of Driscoll's *Thank You For Coming* trilogy, the first of which, *Attendance*, explored everyday embodied actions. While *Attendance* incorporated only sporadic wordplay, *Play* builds upon and complicates the themes of *Attendance* by foregrounding language through storytelling, song, and dialogue. Driscoll dramatizes the complexities of communication, where communication is never one conversation, but a collision of voiced and unvoiced parts.

Consider the first act of *Play*, a play within a play (again, always two conversations, always mirrors) where the ensemble performs as a theater troupe performing a show. Ostensibly, the show is a story about the adventures of a character named Barbone, who seeks theatrical stardom. However, structured improvisational techniques trouble the conceptual stability of both plot and character. In the drag wedding scene of Barbone's parents, for example, the players wear Greco-Roman style adornments and flower wreaths over their otherwise naked bodies, stripped to thongs. Barbone is born as a naked crying adult body in a wig in a campy, slapstick scene. A narrator tells one possible story of Barbone's birth, reading from cue cards filled out by the audience during the processional. Hilariously incoherent, the improvisational storytelling refuses any stable notion of plot.

Barbone shape-shifts as each player assumes the role before passing it off to another. Never a single being, the ensemble engenders Barbone within changing generic conventions. The play breaks from tragedy to comedy, drama to dance musical. Each scenario

introduces a new score in which the ensemble plays the game of Barbone, exploring many arrangements of being together. Driscoll choreographs both body gestures and sound gestures with irreverence towards the conventions of dance, making the piece its own world where genre (and gender) slide into social disorder. The “play” in *Play* is both noun and verb, a staged play and to play. In one sense, “play” as a verb means to partake in a game, where the player knows the rules. However, it can also signify breaking known rules: experimenting with form, going off script, improvising. To the queer listener, “play” may signify a strategy of breaking with heteronormative scripts, as in “gender play” and “role play.” Play can be a creative and defiant act at the same time.

As *Play* progresses, Driscoll strips down the artifice of theater to consider everyday performance. In one scene, the dancers perform a conversation which could take place in a drama classroom. Dressed in street clothes, they stand shoulder to shoulder and speak facing the audience. They try to communicate their feelings of isolation and vulnerability, but hesitate. Unfinished utterances hang in the air. The dancers repeat and remix the dialogue while mingling in a pantomime of socialization, temporally and spatially disjointed. The voiced and unvoiced conversations form a reflective double text like the two columns of a [Samuel Delany](#) novel. A dancer’s shoulder may heave back in laughter, while their face crumples with pain; a dancer’s voice may respond to a voice across stage, while their hands fling to speak in the opposite direction. With technical virtuosity, the dancers hold multiple languages, and temporalities, in their bodies at once. Here, as in *Attendance*, Driscoll plays an active role. She moves about the scene, mirroring the dancers and blurring the line between choreographer and dancer, teacher and student.

Within this mess of conflicting languages, meaning making becomes difficult. How can a person say what they mean? How can a self be a somebody separate but together with other somebodies? Why is it so easy to feel lonely in a crowd? Driscoll choreographs these questions in *Play* through a virtuosic attention to the gestural (the gesture being perhaps the smallest emotional unit of dance). Dancers perform from a vast repertoire of practiced gestures which fail to align meaningfully. Driscoll upsets the expectation for choreographic conformity; dance here looks like a mix of mismatched language and movements.

Play leaves audiences applauding and laughing. The brilliant musical numbers and jingles (my favorite may be *I Don’t Know Where This Rage Comes From*, sung fiercely by Driscoll and backed by an ensemble in glam rock attire) invite audiences to sing along. It’s easy to become lost in the world of Driscoll’s dance, which imagines a time and place besides the present. Perhaps, *Play* seems to suggest, being lost is not a bad place to be: lost among mirrors and reflections, language and meanings, lost in play, ensemble, intimacy, and time. To become lost in play may be one path towards a more imaginative social world, which always needs finding but cannot be found.

By Hannah Salzer
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