

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Erin Reid

How are you alone? What brings you together?

by Andrew Sargus Klein

In Relate, created by Matthew Williams and performed by Williams and Peter Redgrave, doesn't give its audience any signposts prior to the performance. There's no program, the title isn't particularly illuminating, and the set is a plain expanse of marley on the third floor of Annex Theater in downtown Baltimore. Both dancers are in black floral leggings and white tank tops. It's part of the [2018 BIDA season](#). That's it.

The minimalism is refreshing, if opaque. It's somewhat of a risk, artistically: the performance hinges entirely on the interplay between the performers and any narrative therein, though "narrative" can be as much individual projection as it is artistic intention. *In Relate* is a loosely structured improvisation; as such there's plenty of space for the audience to build its own framework for the relationship unfolding in real time.

The two dancers begin in sculptural stillness, their foreheads touching, the score silent. They move to the floor in a sequence of contact improvisation, their chests the most important point of connection. Williams moves to the edge of the space, pacing the perimeter, leaving Redgrave in the middle. From here on, through to the end, there is little variation in this structure: a short sequence of physical, chest-driven contact improvisation followed by separation, with one body in the middle of the space, the other somewhere on the edge. Contact, then separation; contact, isolation.

These moments are the most compelling, and I experience them as an exploration of male relationships and intimacy, be they platonic, romantic, or intellectual. I am struck by the physicality of Redgrave and Williams when they bring their chests together, one leading the other in an interplay of power and submission. When they part, I feel a distinct lack of intimacy between them, which dovetails with my general sense that men seek solitude to sort their feelings, and that intimacy is largely found in direct physicality. Williams and Redgrave rarely look at one another when apart. They're isolated both physically and emotionally despite occupying the same space.

At one point, Williams sits in a window sill—an unexpectedly powerful gesture that adds an element of existential despair to the narrative I've imposed: isolation borders on losing yourself entirely. It's quite relatable: sitting in a window sill and looking out at the cityscape is familiar and pedestrian. Redgrave provides similar moments that offer a calming, if not outright humorous, counterpoint to the overall seriousness of the work. He mugs for the audience, emits small laughs with loaded glances, and puts his face right next to one of the floor lights, blowing at it like a candle. It's a subtly humanizing dimension to the experience.

That the choreographic structure quickly establishes a pattern is grounding; in the absence of any other contexts for the performance, the clear movement structure prevents the work from collapsing on itself. The downside, though, is that it puts a ceiling on expectation. The work runs a little over 30 minutes, and there's little that surprises me, with one exception, which is the performance's high-water mark.

Khristian Weeks (a long-time collaborator with Redgrave) scored the performance, applying his recognizable approach of turning found audio (in this case, recordings of the performance's rehearsals) into textural and aleatoric soundscapes. Halfway through *In Relate*, Williams and Redgrave face each other in the middle of the space, but instead of bringing their chests together, they stand up straight and take wide side steps in patterned unison, without facing each other. It's a stark moment, for the reasons outlined above: despite their close proximity and mirrored gestures, there's little connectivity between them.

Toward the end of the piece, the score brings back the sound of their percussive feet on the floor, creating a rhythmic grid. The effect is such that I recreate that earlier duet as they come together, once more in contact, a psychological bridge between the two moments—isolation follows us forward, the choices we make in what we offer to ourselves and each other can resonate forward. We are accumulations of interior and exterior relationships. The result of these moments from *In Relate* is a solemn rumination hinting at something missing—from the performance, from myself, from elsewhere—that could resolve the lingering sense of loneliness, of asymptotic intimacy.

[*In Relate*](#), Matthew Williams, Annex Theater, April 20-22.

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