

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ian Douglas

They Didn't Want to Die

by Mira Treatman

In his curtain speech with Ishmael Houston-Jones, Miguel Gutierrez described [Variations on Themes from Lost and Found: Scenes From a Life and Other Works by John Bernd](#) as having its “authorship in the air.” The ambitious interdisciplinary experiment was a collage of works by Bernd, who died at age 35 of AIDS complications in 1988. Houston-Jones and Gutierrez* combined forces to resurrect his dances that otherwise could have been permanently lost.

The cast of seven youthful dancers gazed at the audience for the duration of the sexy thump of SOS Band’s “[Just Be Good To Me](#).” Due in part to the sentimental, stylized music and theatrical tableaux, the ensemble felt somewhere between the Breakfast Club and #SquadGoals. They appeared as a cohesive unit, perhaps a chosen family, from 1988 and 2018 simultaneously.

“I’ve decided I need to take control of my illness,” Toni Carlson declared as the others wheeled a cart topped with a vintage blender and smoothie ingredients. One by one the cast narrated an absurd recipe and placed their item in the blender: medication, yogurt, watercress, Rolling Rock, a banana seductively peeled by Charles Gowin. This phallic gag was followed immediately by the dancers putting their hands on the roaring blender, and wailing in unison with their eyes tightly shut, “And I do not want to die until I have been of service to my gifts. And this is my destiny, to love and seek love...” No sooner than the blender stopped buzzing, they were unbound again. They seemed to dance for an unnamed higher purpose as Lou Reed’s “[Street Hassle](#)” triumphantly blasted. *Variations* employed a devastating roller coaster ride of tonal shifts, which was perhaps the truest storytelling.

Variations' poignancy stemmed from its context as art that was temporarily lost. People born after 1988 have seen it in New York and on tour across the U.S. We'll never know what Bernd would have produced as a mature artist in his pursuit of "serving his gifts," but we do have his youthful perspective in defiance of his illness permanently preserved. The tenderness with which the creative team seems to have "served" their friend and those he represents is at the heart of *Variations'* potency and relevance.

[*Variations on Themes from Lost and Found: Scenes from a Life and other works by John Bernd*](#), Ishmael Houston-Jones and Miguel Gutierrez, Christ Church Neighborhood House, September 14 - 16.

*The full creative team included Ishmael Houston-Jones, Miguel Gutierrez, Jennifer Monson, Carol Mullins, Nick Hallett, and the dancers, Toni Carlson, Talya Epstein, Alvaro Gonzalez, Charles Gowin, Madison Krekel, Johnnie Cruise Mercer, and Alex Rodabaugh.

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