



EMERGENT SUMMER, PART 2

The lobby of the Ace Hotel Boerum Hill is an excellent place to work, particularly in the room with the long table and library lamps. And as several Brooklynites working late found out last Wednesday evening when the performers of Volta filled the space with their intimate dance theater, it is also an excellent surprise venue for contemporary dance and live music.

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Performance

Volta and Mamie Green's "Lovers' Discourse" / Monica Bill Barnes and Company's "Lunch Dances" / Kim Brandt's "Wayward"

Place

Ace Hotel, Brooklyn, September 10 / New York Public Library, Manhattan, May, / Rockaway Beach, Queens, August 2025

Words

Candice Thompson



“Lovers’ Discourse,” mixed spoken word and dance: setting some famous monologues on love from William Shakespeare (arranged by Matthew Gasda) to rigorous physical scores, all under a conceptual framework owing to Roland Barthes’ book of almost the same name, *A Lover’s Discourse*. The ensuing conversation— between two bards from the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, a cast of 10 dancers, and musician Alexandre Merbouti—grappled with how to express the complex stew of emotions that make up love. Ravishment, jealousy, concealment, sex, and union ordered the migrating performance.

Choreographer and director Mamie Green’s partnering for duets, trios, and quartets, pushed up against the closely gathered audience with philosophical arguments, appreciations,

and laments. Some of us were ticketed audience, many others incidental spectators as guests of the hotel; but we all came into close proximity with bold lifts, sexy entanglements, and playful weight sharing.

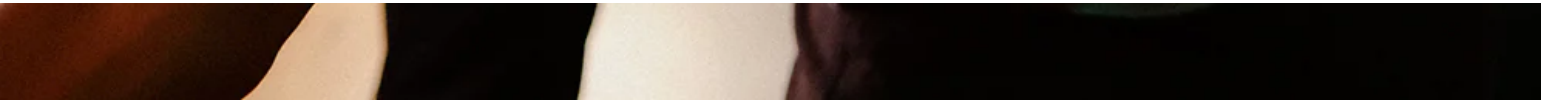
I watch the first section, which includes a Romeo, a Juliet, and a third dancer acting as both conduit and barrier between the two, from up against the hotel's elevator bank. Kimie Parker pushes her head into August Gray Gall's chest. The couple moves forward with trepidation while Marcus Sarjeant circles. People step out of the elevator to find themselves in the middle of this performative love triangle. Their rapidly shifting expressions from confusion to delight is enough to make me feel jealous. I came looking for this performance, expecting a certain level of artistry; but to stumble upon such a curiously constructed trio, Gall's voice projecting celestial imagery while their bodies resist and acquiesce to new relationships, is clearly a different kind of treat.

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Merbouti's guitar accompaniment sets up a private-feeling mood in this well-trafficked space. We follow his sounds and the gestures of the performers back into the bar and later, into the area with the long table. The ambient noise of lively conversations can be heard in the background, even though this room is relatively quiet. A quartet of men broken into two duets cause most people seated at the table to close their computers or at least divert their eyes from their screens. Sarjeant and Donterreo Culp shine in some incredibly athletic contortions while Tim Griffin Allen and Gall add wit and humor a la Cleopatra and Antony. Brought back once more into the bar area, four women fluctuate in relationship to one another. Through the words of Juliet and Hermione, they discover Balanchine-esque weaving patterns, arms and heads overlapping in a "dream of total union of the loved being."

There was much to enjoy in this work: the bridging of site-specific dance with dinner theater and a compelling cast, that included many exquisite movers like Green and Julian Grubman. But much of the pleasure for me simply came from the emergence of highly attuned and articulate bodies arising out of the familiar din of city life.



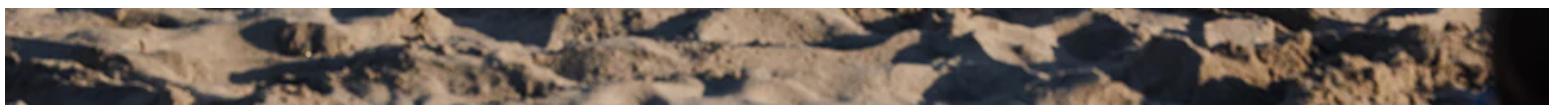
"Lunch Dances" by Monica Bill Barnes and Company at the New York Public Library. Photograph by Paula Lobo

Back in May, Monica Bill Barnes and Company's "Lunch Dances," at the New York Public Library on 5th Avenue was similarly satisfying with its finale in the Rose Reading Room among New Yorkers of all kinds, from students to remote workers to unhoused neighbors. Likewise, Kimberly Brandt's "Wayward," swept passerby into an amorphous and ever-expanding tableaux at the annual Beach Sessions in Rockaway, Queens a couple weeks ago.

In each case, the audience was left inside the world of the show even as it ended. In "Wayward," the performers continued their scores long after the audience stood up and began milling; we were free to ponder a gorgeous sculpture of bodies dotting the dunes from all sides and also to question whether Leslie Cuyjet might need a hand getting down from the tall lifeguard chair

(another choreographer whispered in my ear, “It is always harder to get down than go up.”). This kind of magic, and humanism, is what dance is excelling at in this moment when it is no small thing to be jolted out of pessimism, and increasingly, what is really feeling like nihilism.





A large portion of our performing arts institutions are in trouble. Some continue to struggle with funding structures that have never been sufficient or sound and were made only worse through Covid-19. And others, specifically the Kennedy Center, are losing the fight against censorship and authoritarianism. Stalwart audiences are also becoming more inconsistent and, in some places, dwindling: I have been saddened by how sparse some houses have been at excellent performances in the last couple of years.

And yet, the output from so many dance artists remains creative and high-level, engaging, and hyperbolic as it sounds, life-giving. They are finding these quotidian moments and busy public spaces and electrifying them with form and poetry. They are finding audiences where they are already at and bringing the rest of us along for that special ride. I am grateful for their insistence on emergence and surprise, and communion with and amongst friends and strangers. They made my summer.

CANDICE THOMPSON

Candice Thompson has been working in and around live art for over two decades. She was a dancer with Milwaukee Ballet before moving into costume design, movement education and direction, editing and arts writing. She attended New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, graduated from St. Mary's College LEAP Program, and later received an MFA in literary nonfiction from Columbia University. From 2010-2021

she was editorial director of DIYdancer, a project-based media company she co-founded. Her writing on dance can be found in publications like *Andscape*, *ALL ARTS*, *ArtsATL*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Dance Magazine*, and *The New York Times*.

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