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DANCE | DANCE REVIEW

## Visual Arts Come to the Theater as Genres Blend and Bend

Jack Ferver and Ralph Lemon at the Fisher Center at Bard

By SIOBHAN BURKE NOV. 23, 2014



**The House Is Open:** Jack Ferver in his performance and visual work “Chambre,” created with Marc Swanson, at the Bard College Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts. Credit Julieta Cervantes

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — With the recent proliferation of dance in museums, artists and curators have had to reimagine nontheatrical spaces — galleries, hallways, atriums — as sites for performance, a task more delicate and complicated than it might sound. But what if the challenge were inverted? What would happen, say, if a performing arts center temporarily reimaged itself as an art museum?

That was the question behind “The House Is Open,” an inventive and thoughtfully assembled exhibition at the Bard College Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts. For four days beginning on Thursday, this Frank Gehry complex, with its rippling steel facade, opened its many-roomed interior to artists blurring lines between performance and visual art: Jack Ferver and his collaborator Marc Swanson, Ralph Lemon, Jennifer Monson, John Kelly, Tad Beck and Nature Theater of Oklahoma. By the end of the day on Friday, when I attended, it was difficult to think of those disciplines as discrete categories, as anything other than symbiotic, fluid, inseparable.

Four of the artists offered twofold projects, with installation and performance components. In the boundary-eroding spirit of the event, these made intelligent use of backstage areas as much as of designated stage space, particularly in the two newest works: the devious “Chambre,” by Mr. Ferver and Mr. Swanson; and, in its New York premiere, Mr. Lemon’s exquisitely dense and disquieting “Scaffold Room.” In both of these, the set for the performance doubled as a stand-alone installation that underscored themes of danger, impermanence and mutable identities.

The audience entered “Chambre,” a dance-theater work based on Jean Genet’s 1947 play, “The Maids,” from one wing of the 200-seat Luma Theater. At first those seats, which we would eventually occupy, were masked by a white scrim, and we could roam through Mr. Swanson’s pristine if mildly weathered set, a bright white maze of wardrobes, windows, mirrors and fabric sculptures.

A figure in gold appeared: Mr. Ferver masquerading as Lady Gaga. Perched on a white pedestal, he addressed us with a passage from that pop diva’s deposition about her assistant, Jennifer O’Neill, who sued her over pay.

“She thinks she’s just like the queen of the universe,” Mr. Ferver said in character. “But in my work and what I do, I’m the queen of the universe every day.”

It was a fitting prelude to the fragmented story within a story of two servant sisters (Mr. Ferver and the equally beguiling Jacob Slominski, dressed identically in Reid Bartelme’s sheer beige frocks) who hatch a plan to flee the country after killing their Gaga-esque employer, the gloriously off-kilter Michelle Mola. Through his characteristically biting humor and efficient choreography — like Ms. Mola’s aerobic gesticulations as she gazes into the mirror and chants, “I love and approve of myself” — Mr. Ferver elucidates issues of class disparity and the cyclical nature of exploitation. And he doesn’t shield himself from his own critiques.

The mythology of the diva reappeared, though more enigmatically, in Mr. Lemon’s “Scaffold Room,” which took place in the cavernous backstage of the larger Sosnoff Theater. (That theater’s wings alone were big enough to house Ms. Monson’s expansive “Live Dancing Archive” and its related video installation.) Cinder-block walls rose up around the titular structure, a cubelike edifice where the transfixing Okwui Okpokwasili and April Matthis delivered successive monologues — embodying shades of many people, from Beyoncé to Bob Dylan — in the slippery format of a lecture-musical.

The “room” held just a few objects: a record player; a folding chair; a pink, plastic-wrapped mattress, on which Ms. Okpokwasili bounced up and down as we entered the space. A detachable wall projected domestic still lifes and images of the Mississippi Delta community that

has inhabited much of Mr. Lemon's work. From a lectern off to one side, the performers read sexually graphic, sometimes violent excerpts from texts by the feminist novelist Kathy Acker.

The deluge of language and ideas — encompassing race, ancestry, authorship, freedom, pleasure, power, the body and especially the female body — is intended to be felt, perhaps, more than analyzed. At the same time, it feels driven by an unshakable logic, an imperative to be nowhere but right there in "Scaffold Room."

But once we emerged, there were plenty of places to be, like Mr. Kelly's meditative film installation, or the balcony cafe, where we could color pictures of the Empire State Building as part of Nature Theater's forthcoming crowdsourced "Empire!" The Fisher Center may not be the coziest place, but "The House Is Open" made us feel at home.

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