

DANCE



CROUCHING TIGER
Harrell finds the space he needs.

Project runway

Trajal Harrell struts his stuff in his new *Before Intermission* **By Gia Kourlas**

Trajal Harrell's work is slippery. Using runway and voguing techniques and borrowing from literature and film, his experimental dances explore the ephemeral nature of cool, incorporating choreography that exists on an unnerving edge between authenticity and artificiality. "I think it's an issue of authority," Harrell, 37, says. "Once people know that I mean what I'm doing, they go with me," he says. "I feel that very few people, the first time they see my work, sit comfortably in it. But that's what you're going to get in my theater, and that's what is interesting about me."

At the Kitchen, as part of a shared program curated by Tere O'Connor that also features Karen Bernard's *Totally in Love*, Harrell presents *Before Intermission*, a romantic dance inspired by James Baldwin's 1956 novel, *Giovanni's Room*. "For both Karen and Trajal, choreography is a conduit to ideas in individual ways," O'Connor explains. "Trajal is literally quoting books through the brushstrokes of voguing, and that is so anomalous! There's no way for the audience to enter into the work other than his way."

For Harrell, who has previously focused on the work of Bret Easton Ellis, *Before Intermission* marks a shift in literary direction. Baldwin's novel was groundbreaking for its depiction of a gay relationship,

and at first, Harrell was resistant. "I really did not want my work to fall into an easy reading of race and sexuality," he says. "But then I decided that I needed to face my fear."

Conceptually, Harrell envisions *Before Intermission* as one-half of a dance; part of that approach had to do with the split-evening format. "But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it's a minimalist gesture," he explains. "The piece is not only formally missing its half, but it's actually longing for something. It leaves you wanting some-

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thing more, and that's very risky. Most people want to see something that succeeds, but I'm interested in trying to create art that gets at an unfulfilled place."

Harrell—whose dance productions, however stark, don't shy from a deep understanding of the theater—originally aspired to be an actor; while at Yale University, he focused on American studies and theater. After graduating in 1990 he gradually found himself more

attracted to dance, but it wasn't his first exposure to movement: Growing up in southeast Georgia, Harrell was a gymnast from ages 8 to 11. "I had gymnastics from 3 to 4pm, and I would have my grandfather pick me up at 5pm, so I could watch the girls' ballet class," he recalls, laughing. "I never told anyone about that. I knew that boys in my town did not take ballet."

In the late '90s, he attended his first fashion show and was blown away by its theatricality. "It was completely dance to me—you just can't get a sense of it on television," Harrell says. He was similarly energized the first time he attended a voguing ball. "What was even more interesting to me was that [voguing] started during the same time Judson Dance Theater began in the '60s," he explains. "It seems to be that the history of runway movement probably began in the courts of Louis XIV, where ballet really started. The overlapping histories fascinate me."

In *Before Intermission*, seven dancers mix runway movement with numerous costume changes to evoke a dream landscape, while excerpts from the film *American Gigolo* are screened. But the mysterious framework of the piece stems from *Giovanni's Room*. "It's my riff on the book," Harrell explains. "I'm always trying to connect dance to other things; as I see it, dance is on the street, on television, on the news, in film, at the gym—many choreographers aren't involved in dance just because they want to make this thing that's isolated. They make something inexorably linked to all of our physical lives."

Before Intermission is, at its core, a mood piece; for Harrell, who began creating it last summer in Berlin, that city had an influence. "It's superficial to say that Berlin is somber," he says. "It's spacious, but there's something quite cloudy about the city that makes it very free, and that atmosphere affected me. There's a lot of space and emptiness in my work. Space is good—it's formal, it's strong, it's strict, and as long as you frame it well, it's something special. I love to feel space, and I don't know if I trusted that before."

Trajal Harrell presents *Before Intermission* at the Kitchen Friday 24 and Saturday 25.