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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

## Life's mystery: Who's framing whom?

**FIGURES ON A FIELD.**

Conceived and directed by Dean Moss, with Laylah Ali. Continues through Saturday at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., Manhattan. Tickets \$15. Call 212-255-5793 or visit [www.the-kitchen.org](http://www.the-kitchen.org). Seen Friday.

BY APOLLINAIRE SCHERR

Laylah Ali's delicate gouaches, featured in the last Whitney and Venice biennales, subject stick-legged cartoon figures to gruesome acts. In one disarming small painting, three bubbleheads hang by ropes, rendered as elegant lines, while one bystander forces another to watch. The reluctant onlooker happens to be missing his arms and a leg, which the hanged men dangle in their own arms. "Look," the coercive stickman seems to be saying, "they have something you need."

The bubbleheads are left to deal with a legacy of violence perpetrated on their people. They're also stuck playing the parts of aggressors as much as victims. All the figures — the hanged men as well as those haplessly ensconced in Klannish regalia — are brown, which is to say, black. In a brilliant move, choreog-



Okwui Okpokwasili and Wanjiru Kamuyu in choreographer Dean Moss' "figures on a field," based on Laylah Ali's paintings

rapher Dean Moss translates Ali's knotty concerns to the stage (with Ali as adviser) by scrutinizing the act of translation itself. The exquisitely constructed "figures on a

field" asks: What happens when you frame real people as if they were flat, fictive figures? It moves with stealthy grace between the political and aesthetic meanings of

"frame."

Moss' stage design features frames inside of frames: a white rectangle painted over The Kitchen's black back wall, against which Moss is flattened as we enter the theater; the white flooring that demarcates the stage space, to whose borders the seven performers are highly keyed; and a video overhead in which the cast briefly squiggles past as speedily as flagella.

To begin, the performers array themselves in deliberate clumps and look anywhere but out front. They're avoiding us. Like all audiences, we're framing them.

In beautifully paced scenes, they move between pretending to hurt each other and really hurting each other, or close. On the one hand, they stick Band-Aids over invisible wounds or pile each other up like trash. On the other, they play a fierce game of dodgeball

(with balls as bumpy as skin). In the most disturbing moment, Moss hands David Thomson a belt; Thomson tightens it around Moss' neck and drags him backward. Then, Moss hands him the belt again for another go.

Starting when Marcel Duchamp brought a urinal to an exhibition, artists have made the point that the way an object is framed changes its meaning. "Figures on a field" makes the more frightening point that this framing exerts a force on the picture itself, not just on its meaning. Because the theater is blind to the real — everything is play — Moss can get

someone to asphyxiate him, and we hold our tongues.

The stage of "figures on a field" is both a stage and all the world — or ours in America, anyway.

Apollinaire Scherr is a freelance writer.

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