

Jessica Hagedorn and company in Tenement Lover: (no palm trees/in new york city)



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Black, Asian and Hispanic artists have, until recently, been absent from performance art. The hegemony of white performers in this Eurocentric form had effectively sealed off spaces that cater to its audience: galleries, alternative spaces, schools. However, the growing plurality in the art world has helped make performance a viable medium for artists of color.

Although there have been a limited number of performances by artists of color, several tendencies have been displayed in their works which separates them from most white artists:

1. Use of political concepts, especially ones focusing on racial, sexual, and economic oppression.
2. Connection with revolutionary images and ideas of Third World peoples.
3. Use of ritual especially by African-American artists.
4. Humor, both to illustrate biases and to relieve tension.
5. Symbolism. By men, large ritual objects similar to objects in secret societies, especially musical instruments and weapons. By women, this involves dolls, toys, and costumes.

Of course, some of these tendencies are found in many performance artists' work, but in the hands of artists of color this vocabulary is pervasive and pointed.

Three women of color recently presented performances in downtown spaces; there were similarities in their work, but two of the pieces were considerably riskier than the other one.

Candace Hill-Montgomery's *Teamwork: The American Way* at Franklin Furnace was both ambitious and problematic. It includ-



A WORLD OF COLOUR

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ed an installation by the artist, slides, a gospel choir, and selected tapes of Malcolm X's speeches. To the delight of some and the chagrin of others, her piece brought together the Black United Front, a Brooklyn-based political group and the downtown art audience.

The installation was elaborate. It consisted of dolls, musical instruments, military toys and toy animals. Hill-Montgomery explained (privately) that the installation symbolized the "Community," a village setting of miniature houses, toy animals and people, and the "Ideal City," composed of painted cinder blocks with a couple at its pinnacle. Between these two settings was a vast space with two musicians on either side and a miniature army (unseen by the villagers).

The choir began the performance with a singing of the Beatitudes. As their voices faded, the speech of Malcolm X about the murder of four black girls in Birmingham rang out. During this time, slides focusing on protests against police brutality were flashed against the wall behind the installation. Hill-Montgomery's choice of speeches combined with the singing in an evocative way, giving the piece a generous

texture: the live voices of the singers, the live voice of a martyred leader—the outrage, humor, helplessness and hope were all there. Unfortunately, that tone was not sustained in the imagery. The slides, at first provocative, became distracting as the performance continued; it would have been interesting to have seen slides made by the artist as well as those generalized images brought by the Black United Front. Furthermore, there was no reference during the piece (except for a brief moment at its beginning) to the elaborate installation.

Even with its problems *Teamwork: The American Way* was distinctive. Hill-Montgomery reminded the art world of a rarely noticed constituency: the black, brown, and yellow people who live next door or in the next borough. She also brought out black people who wouldn't know Soho from midtown striking a blow against the provincialism that pervades the black communities and the Third World art world. The piece ended with Malcolm's speech on the traits of a true revolution ("A revolution is bloody"); the choir sang "Where Would I Be?" The audience gave them and Ms. Hill-Montgomery a standing ovation.

Jessica Hagedorn's *Tenement Lover*: (no palm trees/in new york city . . .) is concerned with alienation, cross culturalism, and despair. Built around an adaptation of her short story, *The Blossoming of Bong Bong* and four songs written by her and The Gangster Choir, the piece included live performance of the songs and a scenario that treated culture shock, political repression in the Phillipines, urban ennui, violence, and fascination with American popular culture.

As directed by Thulani Davis, the piece was composed of a set divided by a barbed wire construction by artist John Woo between the "real world" of a rehearsal studio and the "dream world" of Bong Bong. In the "real world," the Gangster Choir performed songs as a kind of backdrop to Hagedorn's monologue. In the "dream world" Renee Montagne and Luis Burgos acted out a stylized class battle: colored immigrant as chauffeur/servant to white woman complete with sun glasses, fashion magazines, and a pina colada. The interaction between these two worlds centered on the television set and the reading of letters. For most of the piece, Hagedorn stayed in the "real world" with her band while Burgos and Montagne remain in the "dream world" but as the piece progressed, Burgos strayed into the "real world." He turned the TV channel: ironically, John Gavin was being named ambassador to Mexico. These excursions between worlds gave a surreal touch to the piece. Also, the changes in tone emanate from the songs/monologues: Hagedorn read letters from Bong Bong about his adventures in New York City, and as he became progressively crazy, the songs got tougher, more outrageous, more violent. Hagedorn countered the action of Bong Bong with a telling of a dream, one in which her family and finally she were killed

by members of the Phillipine army. Bong Bong's derangement in the New World was balanced with the terrors of the old.

Although the performance was well-crafted, the interaction between the two worlds was at times strained since the connecting links—the television and the letters—were only used by Hagedorn (once by Burgos). The band was used primarily for the songs except for one member who sat completely covered by raingear, holding an umbrella; most of the time, the other members remained passive, separate from the action.

Tenement Lover's power stemmed from the conflict which arises when two cultures intersect. Hagedorn's charisma, the Ganster Choir's solid musicianship, and the able performances of Burgos and Montagne combined to create an intriguing piece. Alienation and culture shock are not particularly new issues, but they are rarely presented in this way.

Hill-Montgomery and Hagedorn both provided audiences with performances that tested the boundaries of their visions. They used repetition of images, symbolism, and space to convey two very different insights: the former involved cultural/political aspiration; the latter, cultural dislocation. Some of both of those themes provided Ntozake Shange with the juicier lines in *Mouths: A Daughter's Geography*. The choreopoem was performed on the same bill with Hagedorn at the Kitchen, and was also directed by Thulani Davis. It would appear that the only thing connecting their pieces was the director because Shange's piece stayed safely within the boundaries of the choreopoem, a concept she has singlehandedly popularized. *Mouths* is a series of poems strung together around a

"romance" between Shange and Richard Lawson, a handsome, yet limited actor. The poems speak to the problems, prophecies, and passions of black people whether in America or the Third World. The poems are danced, and movement often enhanced the work, especially during "What are you doin' on those goddamned horses" in which Shange's outraged admonitions to the liberators of Haiti are displayed in bold and beautiful movement by the dancers: Ed Mock, Halify Osimare and Elvia Marta. At other times, the movement was awkward and jarring.

The use of Richard Lawson was the major flaw in the performance: he simply was not needed. And his performance especially during the "some men" excerpts were incredibly uncomfortable—which was not surprising since the poems are angry harangues or malicious character sketches of men. When Shange performs them alone they are wicked, bitter storypoems. In Lawson's performance there was an element of sadomasochism that detracted from the poems' power.

Even though *Mouths* was entertaining, it shared little with the pieces composed by Hill-Montgomery, Hagedorn or other performance artists like Lorraine O'Grady or Ping Chong. It was a solid, slick entertainment although serious because Shange's subjects are serious. It was an "uptown" piece—the beginnings of what seemed like a new theater piece. The lack of objects or visual imagery of any sort could be construed as "poor theater" but the performers were not objectified. *Mouths* was compelling as theater, not as performance.

Patricia Jones is a poet and critic whose recent collection of poems is *Mythologizing Always*.