

## PERFORMANCE

# Nearly Sort of Not Dance Maybe

By Sally Banés

**ALMOST DANCE.** At the Kitchen, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615 (November 16 to 25).

"Almost Dance" was a curious conglomeration of performance art, music, and dance. On the one hand, it represents a new movement, in the '80s, away from the purism of genres that dominated the '70s, toward hybrid forms. As in the '60s, the blurring of boundaries and forms immediately poses the question of what constitutes the separate genres whose identities are being challenged. The vexing question of what dance is, exactly, and how it differs from performance art, from theater, from music, from play and games, from sports, from language, and so on, has been at the basis of much (if not all) postmodern dance. But on the other hand, so many of the rules for doing, watching, and understanding dance were broken—or at least tested—in the '60s that to group these current hybrids as falling outside of dance seems like beating a dead horse. Today we no longer have the seemingly monolithic academy of dance tradition that the dancers of the Judson group, for instance, felt moved to repudiate. Today, when anything is possible on the dance stage, whether in a Soho loft, a Lower East Side cabaret, or the New York State Theater, and when, with the reemergence of narrative and virtuosic technique among the avant-

garde (and the simultaneous use by the mainstream of what once could only be considered avant-garde terrain), it is sometimes hard to say what differentiates the mainstream from its alternatives stylistically. It hardly seems original to fall just outside the genre.

The result of the recent history of post-modern dance is that while our fundamental ideas of what dance is have been shaken, we are left feeling that lines should be firmly drawn *somewhere* and redefinitions attempted: if *anything* can be dance, what's the point of making distinctions between dance and non-dance at all? Paradoxically, at the same time, we revel in dances that open their borders to embrace a variety of elements from the other arts, from popular media, and from all sorts of other aspects of everyday life, ranging from diaries to politics.

With its mix of downtown artists who work in that dimly defined area between dance, performance, and music, The Kitchen series promised to shed more light on differences while also suggesting lines of overlap, congruence, and divergence. The provocative title and the array of performers alone did not, however, provide enough of a conceptual framework for the issues that one felt or hoped might be addressed. I saw nearly every performance either live or on videotape and, despite my interest in and enjoy-



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Ishmael Houston-Jones in *Fissioning*

ment of many of the pieces—quite a few of which I'd seen elsewhere this season or last—I ended up regretting the lack of a clear rationale behind the programming, or perhaps more accurately, the failure to carry out the original impulse for a rationale.

For one thing, I wondered whether the choreographers in the series felt insulted at being labeled "almost dancemakers." There was an unnecessarily belligerent tone about this term of denial—or even failure—a feeling that one was witnessing an artificially assembled Salon des Refusés, populated in fact by some of the favorite acceptés of the avant-garde, like Pooh Kaye, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Wendy Perron. And since so many of the choreographers chose as methods for moving their contributions away from pure dance either narrative (such as Barbara Allen in her parodic *Savage Bliss*

and Hope Gillerman in her skewed fairytale *The Princess Story*) or spoken commentary (Stephanie Skura in *Chase Scene*, a tongue-in-cheek exploration of videodance techniques), one began to feel as though an extremely narrow definition of dance were being proposed—that is, if it's got words it may no longer be dance. On the whole, the "real" dance works seemed slightly diminished in this context.

Yet it was heartening to note that, in contrast, the works presented by non-choreographers were enhanced by the series' suggestive title. Peter Rose, for instance, who works with movement but doesn't design it choreographically, became a dancer as one paid attention to the strong literal gestures that corresponded quite specifically to the autobiographical adolescent adventures of *Loyaltown, USA!* Perhaps in the end, choreography is defined by the eye of the beholder or even by her attitude; perhaps it's more useful to let dance be a pluralistic, inclusive category than to worry about criteria for exclusion.

Or maybe dance is defined by the body of the beholder. Arto Lindsay didn't move around much (a lot of head motions, but in Western dance we tend to discount that as dancing), but his wonderfully off-kilter fake Brazilian songs (almost folk music?) certainly made you feel like dancing up a storm in your seat.

One of my favorite works in the series was *Stalin and Alliluyeva* (Part II of *The Life of Stalin*), a collaboration between the Soviet emigré artists Komar and Melamid and choreographer Meg Eginton (who also danced Stalin, partnering Hillary Harper who danced the role of his daughter on point). With its mock-heroic soundtrack of political anthems and Tchaikovsky ballets and its use of the ballet vocabulary for triumphant posturing rubbing against Eginton's tiny figure of Stalin and our knowledge of the vicious, sordid facts of his regime, it presented a clever, biting parody of socialist realist ballet. ■