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DANCE | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Jérôme Bel: Naked and Alive, Then Clothed and Dead

By BRIAN SEIBERT OCT. 28, 2016



Yannyck Kao-SY, foreground, who's a security officer at the Museum of Modern Art, dancing with other MoMa staffers as part of Jérôme Bel's "MoMA Dance Company." Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Many years ago, Jérôme Bel had some genuinely provocative ideas. In the second and final week that the Crossing The Line festival has been focusing on this French choreographer, those ideas were the revelation in the New York premiere of his early work "Jérôme Bel," even as the premiere of his new, festival-commissioned "MoMA Dance Company" exhibited how his recent art has shrunk into lazy formulas.

Performed at the Kitchen on Thursday night, the self-titled piece, from 1995, still felt freshly experimental. For most of the 50-minute work, there are four performers onstage, all naked. One has the job of holding a bare light bulb on a cord, the work's only illumination. Another provides the music, softly singing Bach's "Goldberg Variations." The final two, a man and a woman, write their names on the back wall in chalk and draw on their flesh with red lipstick.

As they stretch and squeeze their own skin, not excluding genitalia, or as their bellies expand and deflate in silhouette, they prompt thoughts about bodies as strange things. The experiments, like those of curious children, can strike a viewer as disturbingly gross: fingernails bitten off, hands dipped in someone else's urine.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/arts/dance/jerome-bel-naked-and-alive-then-clothed-and-dead.html>

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More often, they crackle with a droll wit. A flow of literal-minded puns, well-paced with little surprises, makes you chuckle and think about identity and language, about bodies (including your own) as absurd.

Performance art that is smart, severe, even philosophical, and at the same time cheeky and funny and entertaining: That's an appealing combination. "Jérôme Bel" explains much about how Mr. Bel's career began. Even the use of a pop song, which later became a cliché for him and for everyone else, retains its original charge in this context. And even though the central couple are in their 50s, the work preserves a young artist's naïve energy. The amalgam of that spirit with older bodies gives the work a distinctive charm now.

Earlier on Thursday, though, Mr. Bel offered an example of what can happen when an artist becomes famous and is asked to reproduce the discoveries of youth on a franchise model. Like Mr. Bel's recent "Gala" and "Ballet (New York)," "MoMA Dance Company," part of the museum's Artist's Choice series, is an outgrowth of Mr. Bel's notorious and internationally successful 2001 work "The Show Must Go On." It was reprised last week at the Joyce Theater as part of the festival, and in it a group of trained and untrained performers enact literal-minded jokes to a series of pop songs.

For "MoMA Dance Company," Mr. Bel extended an invitation to staff members of the Museum of Modern Art. Twenty-five employees signed up. Mr. Bel asked each to prepare a short solo — to pick out a song and a costume and come up with some choreography. For the 30-minute performances, twice each afternoon in the museum's atrium, Mr. Bel selects 10 or so to do their numbers, one at a time, as the other participants stand behind them and try to mimic the routine.

The result is less like a conventional dance company than like a talent show at the company picnic. Who knew that the chief technology officer could dance on pointe? Did you suspect that the guy in security could bust a move? The only provocation is how anodyne and feel-good the whole thing is — how Mr. Bel has substituted self-serving concepts about "democratic potential" or "exposing the Museum's human infrastructure" (to quote the program) in place of the work of an artist. It's like some bonding exercise on a corporate retreat, except that senior and junior staff mingle, and hundreds of outsiders watch.

All of the applause is encouraging, and all of the participants appear to be enjoying themselves. This is Mr. Bel's trick or gift: No one seems embarrassed — not the amateurs onstage, not the people viewing, not even the organizers who fell for Mr. Bel's swindle.