

Two Performa 11 Duets, Distinct Yet Conversant in Their Shared Themes

This city's fall season is infuriating and exhausting: a relentless assault of performances that seems designed to make serious art-goers go crazy. Where else do people sigh with relief upon hearing that show X was terrible, knowing they can strike it from their must-see list?

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But there are silver linings to this madness. One of them is the serendipity of catching, back to back, unrelated shows that nevertheless converse with each other. This is one of the promises of an expansive festival like the Performa 11 biennial, a promise that has been delivered far away from the disappointing main events.

Last weekend I managed to squeeze in Jack Ferver's "Me, Michelle," at the Museum of Arts and Design, and an "avant-premiere" of Trajal Harrell's "Antigone Jr.," at Third Streaming gallery. (Both are Performa 11 events, though neither was produced by the biennial; "Antigone Jr." will have its official premiere next Thursday in Paris.)

Both works are duets. Both deal with repurposed material, folded into larger questions of identity, history, culture and the cult of self. And yet Mr. Ferver and Mr. Harrell are very different artists. How satisfying it is to see them enter the same creative houses, slipping in and out through their own side doors.

Side door or no, Mr. Ferver likes his entrances and exits. He is one of those performers who, no matter the character, is always also playing himself. In this brief dance-theater escapade, in which intense flurries of stylized movement rough up the rapid-fire dialogue, he channels the ultimate diva, one Cleopatra.

As the title indicates, "Me, Michelle" also stars the terrifically smart Michelle Mola, who plays pretty much everything to Mr. Ferver's queen (and shares a choreography credit). They're a petulant, vicious, conniving pair. They're also, of course, totally charming. And cornered by Cleopatra's inevitable end — when Ms. Mola tells her queen to "go to hell" after a dismissive comment, Mr. Ferver meditatively replies: "Too late. Too late."

Remember the Neediest!



PHOTO CREDIT: WHITNEY BROWNE

Thibault Lac and Trajal Harrell performing in "Antigone jr." at Third Streaming on Sunday.

Poor old Cleo, mourning her Antony in between blasts of grandeur and self-pity. She's scrounging after remnants of her glorious past, and as such is the perfect vehicle for a contemporary chameleon like Mr. Ferver, who skips in and out of the role so as to construct a meta-character, his references and registers jostling like echoes in his wake. It's not totally unlike a Ryan Trecartin video piece, albeit less manic and more immediately legible.

A screechy reality-television affect vies with lines from Shakespeare, knowing asides and, most effectively, sketch-

es of choreography reminiscent of Martha Graham, who had a quite different approach to ancient history. Here she is the ancient history, her clawed hands and stomach contractions glinting like archaeological fragments on the two performers' bodies.

Mr. Ferver and especially Ms. Mola wore these fragments easily as they flitted about the small white room Saturday night, the lights of New York shining through the museum's panoramic windows. The Empire Hotel's blood-red sign was an especially fortuitous footnote, while Reid Bartelme's costumes

and John Fireman's music were quietly effective elements (and the briefest of appearances by a Pomeranian, called "the thing," was brilliant).

"Me, Michelle" could be more ambitious in its aims and not settle so often for an arch default. Mr. Ferver is such a charismatic performer it's easy to simply delight in his death throes. Still, I think he might go somewhere stranger and richer if he delayed audience satisfaction just a little bit.

Mr. Harrell is already working in that somewhere. For the past few years he has been investigating an imagined in-

'Me, Michelle' and 'Antigone Jr.' deal with identity, history, culture and the cult of self.

tersection of the Harlem voguing and Judson Dance Theater scenes, creating a series of works that use these parameters to examine slippery notions of gender, the constructed self and how an ephemeral past can influence a complex present.

On Sunday night he and Thibault Lac occupied the small SoHo gallery Third Streaming for the "unsize" version of this series.

True to its size, "Antigone Jr." is both intimate and outside. The audience is pressed up against the performance, with the two dancers entering the first row for costume changes. At times their energy is gloriously too much, as when the two strut fiercely back and forth, emitting a sultry charge. Mr. Harrell morphs into a sashaying, voluptuous femme fatale; Mr. Lac scythes his limbs in joint-popping formations, evoking shades of the miraculous house dancer Javier Ninja from the famed House of Ninja.

Mr. Harrell's house is far older and more infamous. It is the House of Antigone, with him in the main role and Mr. Lac as Antigone's sister, Ismene (here, as in "Me, Michelle," we see flickers of a more emotive modern-dance history). Mr. Lac reads the opening pages of that Sophocles play, and later dons dark glasses to sing along to "Another Night In" by Tindersticks, as Mr. Harrell struts and poses and emotes; camp is one of Mr. Harrell's tools, too, but he wields it with more precision than Mr. Ferver, and with a keen awareness of its limitations.

Much of this voguing-meets-Judson series plays with the juxtaposition of over-the-top theatricality and dry-as-a-bone repetition. Is it possible for the two to coexist, even to support each other? Can we believe in illusions we know to be false? Mr. Harrell seems driven to make transparent all of the various skins we pull over our original one, to show how alien they are and how much they matter.