

Taking the Audience Up Close and Personal, and Beyond Skin Deep

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Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Rebecca Serrell Cyr in RoseAnne Spradlin's "beginning of something" at the Chocolate Factory, wearing Sera-Kim Huenergard's headdress and harness.

RoseAnne Spradlin has a knack for placing dancers and audience members in close quarters. For a while in downtown dance, this sort of intimacy was the new black. Choreographers moved the audience closer to the stage, limited the seating and favored a deadpan display of body parts.

But for Ms. Spradlin, even when focusing the eye on a bare breast or a quivering thigh, it's what throbs beneath the surface that matters. In "beginning of something," a new work that opened at the Chocolate Factory on Wednesday night, her cast moved with impassioned fervor. It requires a certain power to express one of Ms. Spradlin's specialties: taking human nature and slicing it to shreds.

The production features a narrow, elevated platform that is painted with thick brushstrokes and raises the stage more than a foot off the floor. The setting transforms the way the audience, seated mere inches away on three sides, sees the dance. Instead of looking straight or down, we look up. The dancers don't only dominate the space, they also dominate us.

Rebecca Serrell Cyr, naked and strumming a guitar, sits on the edge of the stage as the audience files in. As a recorded instrumental version of Burt Bacharach's "Don't Make Me Over" plays, she pulls on armor in the form of a silver beaded headdress and a shoulder harness, by Sera-Kim Huenergard.

Ms. Cyr then paces the stage, stopping and starting like a mythical creature reborn on a runway. Eventually others follow, swarming onto the stage like bees: Natalie Green, in ripped fur; Molly Poerstel, in a billowy tartan dress; and Rebecca Wender, in a black overcoat. Krzysztof Penderecki's eerie string music takes over.

In the work's first section, according to publicity material, Ms. Spradlin aims to imagine each member of her cast in a previous life. What this means — beyond the costumes — isn't entirely clear. When paired with the repetitive second section, referred to as "a dance within a dance," it just seems rushed.

The second part is turbulent and at its creepiest whenever the intense Ms. Cyr is center stage. There are supported jetés in which one dancer, leaning on the shoulders of two others, soars across with clunky grace. At other times, they kick their legs forward and balance, gripping their calves as if aiming rifles. Gradually ferocity takes hold, and the women stomp, scratch their thighs in upward strokes and shriek like wildcats — though there isn't really enough hair-raising conviction in the sound.

All the while, they stare, not at an invisible horizon, but at themselves. Hanging on three sides of the space's white brick walls are mirrors of varying sizes. The effect is sinister. Knitted into the choreography is a hint at how powerfully a gaze can erode an energetic force — turning it into, as the title goes, something else.

A penetrating gaze is also the subject of another artist's work at the Chocolate Factory. "Before and After the Performance," a series of photographs by Ryutaro Mishima, showcases five dancers — Christopher Williams, Renée Archibald, Alex Escalante, Christalyn Wright and Hilary Clark — in moments before they entered and just after they exited the stage. The "before" images hang in the lobby in advance of "beginning of something," and after the show, the "after" portraits hang in their place. At first, the changes are subtle, but they take on more resonance the longer you stare. It creates a strange effect. Suddenly the spirit of performance is embedded in their skin.

RoseAnne Spradlin's show runs through May 21 at the Chocolate Factory, 5-49 49th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; (212) 352-3101, chocolatefactorytheater.org.