



THE NEW YORKER

Karole Armitage's Curious Cabaret

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May 4, 2012

Karole Armitage has been around a long time and her career has been all over the map, both geographically and stylistically. She got her first professional job (in the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, with its Balanchine aesthetic) almost forty years ago, and joined Merce Cunningham's company in 1976. Then she started choreographing, and formed her own company and her own eclectic style, mashing up ballet and punk in works such as "Drastic-Classicism," from 1981. The nineteen-nineties were spent largely in Europe, and she returned to New York in the early aughts, and created a new company, Armitage Gone! Dance, in 2004. Through May 5th, she's on the Lower East Side, presenting "Werk!: The Armitage Gone Variety Show" at Abrons Arts Center, with her company and several guest acts.

The first of these acts, on the night I saw the show, was "A Moment of Concern," by the artist, designer, and director Doug Fitch. The lights came up on a box seeming to float, its open side facing the audience. Inside was a model of a living room, and resting on the floor of the room, and taking up most of the space inside it, was Fitch's head. He began telling a few stories (feeding a cat mushrooms to test their toxicity; preparing for a party), and concluded, "Little things are very important." Then the box exploded, the shards appearing to fly toward the wings, and the complete Fitch was revealed, surrounded by starlike lights. Dressed in a dapper green jacket, tie, and brown pants, he broke into a music-hall-ish number.

Then the atmosphere became much less genteel, as a nymphesque young woman, barefoot, in a scant off-white costume and crocheted shawl, pleaded from upstage, "It's not me!" Harrying her was a group of women in black: skimpy skirts, tops, head coverings, boots. Down one of the aisles of the audience stomped a man who suddenly shot a gun (just a blank), whose report was extraordinarily loud. He proceeded to take the stage and call off the attackers, who, it turns out, made up the band Roma! (the man is their lead singer). He wore a similar black getup (instead of a skirt, he had a smallish piece of black fabric tied around his waist; as he thrashed about, it was clear that he wore nothing underneath), and on his torso was a tangle of leather straps and metal chains. The woman in white flitted mysteriously about the stage as the band struck up a hard-rock number, the female musicians (keyboardist, bass player, guitarist, and drummer) scowling theatrically. A woman wearing fur boots, who had helium-filled balloons attached to her head by ribbons, moved seductively in the space in front of the stage, and then left by a side door.

The next act was the evening's best. After Roma! had departed the stage, the lights came up on a tall woman who had what looked like a live Weimaraner's head. It was, in fact, one of William Wegman's dogs (Bobbin, age eight), seated behind a woman's outfit that hung before him. As different kinds of dancers—a tapper, a ballerina, a club go-go boy, a hip-hop crew—came out and moved in front of Bobbin, he expressed a kind of mortified weariness. At one point, he yawned. He was patient—used to the artistic demands of humans, no doubt—and observed the goings on closely, but he never seemed tempted to join in. The piece was called “Daydream,” but I wondered if Bobbin might have had another word for it.

An enigmatic bit came next, involving a woman in black high heels, a black leotard with a big X crossing her otherwise bare back, and an enormous black bow above her rear end, facing upstage, reading. She finished, then was joined by another woman, identically attired. They read. This was “Mmmmmm,” Aida Ruilova's contribution. Then came more Roma!, the highlight of which was when Karole Armitage herself strode through the audience and climbed onstage to pick a fight with the underwear-free singer. (It's amazing how recognizable Armitage is; still the same short spiky blond hair, the long legs.) The singer brandished a sword at the nymph; she shot him and triumphed over his body.

“Cockaigne,” by the painter Will Cotton, was in two parts. The first, “Whipped Cream,” featured Miss Ruby Valentine (self-described on her Web site as “an alluring burlesque performer”), who, dressed in a white baby-doll nightie and white heels, did a brief fan dance, accompanied by a staccato string composition by Caleb Burhans. Behind her was a large painting by Cotton, which looked like a closeup of the green flower called Bells of Ireland. In the audience, a woman roamed the aisles, spritzing us with a scent that reminded me of, well, whipped cream. The second part, “Cotton Candy,” involved three ballerinas, on pointe, performing a little pas de trois choreographed by the former A.B.T. and City Ballet dancer Charles Askegard, to music by John Zorn; the women, in white tutus and wearing frothy white headpieces, turned and bourréeed prettily, in front of a large Cotton painting of pink cotton candy.

Armitage has collaborated with different types of artists for many years, and these opening acts, with their varied styles and moods, were an appropriate introduction to the linchpin of the evening, “Rave.” Armitage created “Rave” in 2001, in France, as a response to the attacks of 9/11; rather than focussing on loss, however, it expressed an exuberant spirit of survival and creation. Things are tough now, for different reasons, perhaps, but it seems like a good time for the choreographer to perform this work in the States. True to her history as a choreographer who has blended ballet with unexpected forms, for “Rave” Armitage combined voguing and the martial-art techniques of capoeira (from Brazil) and wushu (from China) with classical steps. (Armitage knows a thing or two about voguing; she choreographed Madonna's “Vogue” video, back in 1990.) The Armitage Gone! company of ten dancers was augmented for “Rave” by sixteen dancers from the Alvin Ailey School, and each was painted head to toe in a bright color—Armitage's way of taking away race as an identifying factor. The costumes, by Peter

Speliopoulos, were of the Burning Man variety: fur boots and chaps, micro-shorts, scarves, loincloths. The score, by David Shea—throbbing, rhythmic—provided an intense dance beat.

There was a relentlessness to it all: the dancing, whether it was sinewy voguing, pedal-to-the-metal ballet, or martial-arts moves, stared us down, daring us to flinch. The performers gave us attitude, and plenty of it, and backed it up with nerve and skills. Groups lined up at the back and strutted forward, posed, then turned and walked back and vogueed for all they were worth; couples came forward and ripped into partnered duets, the men sneering, the women seducing, all of them challenging. When, at the end, all twenty-six dancers were onstage—the different body types, the rainbow colors—it was a kind of thrilling one-world moment. The variety show that led up to it may have been uneven, but life is like that.