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DANCE REVIEW

Sincerity and Irony Meet on the Dance Floor

By **Brian Seibert**

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Could Keely Garfield be the Kate Bush of downtown dance? The question is raised by “Wow,” the bizarre, hilarious, enthralling, confounding and cathartic new work that Ms. Garfield presented on Thursday at Danspace Project. Surely it is the recent comeback tour of Ms. Bush that has put that singer-songwriter on Ms. Garfield’s mind. But it is “Wow” that suggests the comparison: two British-born women, intensely idiosyncratic and theatrical with outlandish taste in costumes, who follow their imaginations uninhibitedly.

The salient difference would seem to be irony. Much of Ms. Bush’s power stems from her absolute sincerity, the sense that she is unaware that anyone might find what she’s doing ridiculous. But Ms. Garfield has always been wry, droll, deadpan. Her assertion in a program note that she meant “Wow” to be “entirely sincere without a hint of irony or cleverness” cannot and should not be taken as entirely sincere.



In a program note, Ms. Garfield asserted that she meant “Wow” to be “entirely sincere without a hint of irony or cleverness.” Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

The program also credits Matthew Brookshire with “music inspired by the poetry of Kate Bush.” What we actually hear, though, are Kate Bush songs. Some are played in the original recordings, some chopped up and looped, but most are performed live by the marvelous Mr. Brookshire, on vocals and piano, joined by Ms. Garfield and her four terrific dancers. The arrangements are stripped down and seductively vibrant. Some lyrics are recited in a manner between sports cheer and Greek chorus. Some singsongy melodies are swapped for the tunes of actual nursery rhymes.

Ms. Garfield, in other words, does not shy from the naïveté of her material. Much of her choreography illustrates the lyrics literally, in the manner of a children’s pageant. There are school desks and a game of musical chairs. She even borrows from the choreographic mode of Ms. Bush’s music videos, an easily mocked 1970s concoction that’s often reminiscent of gymnastic floor routines. When Ms. Garfield and Brandin Steffensen barely manage a series of lifts, their incompetence is intentionally comic, yet many of the other ardent extensions and heroic balances are executed with total conviction.

It is this instability of tone that makes “Wow” such a wild ride. Even the continual costume changes contribute: jumpsuits, sequins, masks, clown noses. Ms. Garfield interpolates public service announcements you might hear on the subway — “if you see something, say something” — and in her hands they are absurd and also possibly profound.

Ms. Garfield, you see, has her own kind of sincerity, at once shockingly direct and totally sneaky. “You can’t take it with you,” she says, and “love is all there is.” At the end, as the drums and passion of Ms. Bush’s “Hounds of Love” blare, and Leslie Kraus is matching that energy with full-out and entirely sincere dancing, the uplift is irresistible. Wow, you feel, wow.

“Wow” continues through Saturday at Danspace Project, 131 East 10th Street, East Village; 866-811-4111, danspaceproject.org.