

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

At River to River, Dancers Tackle Weighty Topics With a Smile

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's free summer arts festival presented several pieces, including "duel c" on Governors Island, that employed humor for serious purposes.



By Brian Seibert

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Now I know what it is like to be herded by a bassoon.

It happened Sunday evening on Governors Island at the start of "duel c," a movement piece by Andros Zins-Browne. Along with several other audience members, I was standing inside "Moving Chains," a large kinetic sculpture by Charles Gaines that is shaped like a ship open at both ends. The bassoonist Maribel Alonso started playing, and then, wielding her buzzing instrument like an elephant's trunk, she swept us spectators to the entrances, clearing the space.

The subject of "Moving Chains" is weighty: no less than slavery. Huge steel chains are strung across the top of the wooden-sided sculpture, which is situated with a harbor view of the Statue of Liberty. On Sunday, the motor that sets those chains into grinding motion was down for maintenance, but Zins-Browne and his fellow dancers provided their own activation. It was a grappling and tussling, like a fight, but with smiles. "Duel c" wrestled with burdensome themes, but in a playful tone. Being herded by a bassoon is amusing.

This light approach to heavy subjects proved consistent across the two other dance performances I saw last week as part of River to River, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's free summer arts festival. Like "duel c," the two shows — "Zero Station" by Molly Lieber and Eleanor Smith and "Ceremonia" by Antonio Ramos and the Gangbangers, both performed at the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural and Education Center in the Lower East Side — are aimed toward healing and liberation. In both, though, this manifested partly as a liberation from clothing.



Dancers with Antonio Ramos and the Gangbangers, including Ramos, center, and Saúl Ulerio, right, performing “Ceremonia” on Thursday. Rachel Papo for The New York Times



“Ceremonia” ends indoors, where the naked dancers pull a white sheet over a black tarp. Rachel Papo for The New York Times



The banging of pots and pans represented a hurricane’s wind and water. Rachel Papo for The New York Times

Nudity has long been part of the practice of Lieber and Smith, a means of increasing intimacy that also plays into their pushback against the objectification of women. Lieber started “Zero Station” in the dress of a Disney princess, Smith in a T-shirt and sparkly hot pants, but neither stayed clothed for long. Soon, they were slow dancing junior high style under an upside-down garbage can with only their bared bottom halves visible.

It’s a Beckett-like image, at once funny and bleak, but “Zero Station” was thin and underdeveloped compared to the usual standards of this excellent duo. During a weak talking section, Smith told us about her experiences as a restaurant hostess, dealing with the bad behavior of chefs and owners, some of whom have been fired. Some things, she was saying, belong in the trash.

The heart of “Zero Station” was the two naked women rolling and loosely wrestling on the floor — at one point to “Let It Go,” that anti-Disney-princess Disney princess anthem. The music, which also included Enya, lightened the dance by introducing irony, but there’s always something serious happening between Lieber and Smith.



Molly Lieber, facing the front, and Eleanor Smith in "Zero Station." Julieta Cervantes



A slow dance inside a garbage can delivered a funny, bleak, Beckett-like image, our critic writes. Julieta Cervantes

The performers in "Ceremonia" also began clothed, only their outfits didn't cover breasts or genitalia. They started outside in the parking lot of the Clemente, galloping and neighing like horses. A procession of naked people writhing, jiggling and playing horsey: That's the tone of "Ceremonia."

Ramos, fabulous and charming, briefly rocking platform heels made from yellow cans of Café Bustelo, maintained the fun as we moved inside to the theater. For a Puerto Rican-born artist to invoke hurricanes, as Ramos did in "Ceremonia," is serious business, but here the attitude was of impish defiance — invoking wind and water with the clip-clop of flip-flops and a banging of pans, then turning and leaping and voguing and twerking in the face of the storm.

This was a loose, strung-out event but one graced with humor. Somewhere in the middle, the dancers, crawling around naked, paused to look behind themselves and ask, "Who's in my booty hole?" It ended with the dancers extending a black tarp across the floor, covering it with a white sheet, then covering themselves in blue paint and rolling across the canvas — at once fish out of water and Action painters.

The most moving and cathartic of the three works, though, was “duel c.” It didn’t stay inside “Moving Chains” but escaped up nearby Outlook Hill. This trajectory gave the work a satisfying shape — a climb — but also several paths, as you followed one performer or other snaking around the switchbacks or bouldering up the shortcuts.

After exiting the “Moving Chains” sculpture, “duel c” moves up Outlook Hill to a small grass-and-stone amphitheater on Governors Island. Julieta Cervantes

Besides climbing, the main actions of the dancers remained in the zone of perpetual entanglement: roughhousing, hugging. One or two of them seemed to wrestle themselves or a unseen presence, like Jacob with the angel. But mostly they wrestled one another, playfully, like siblings.

Outlook Hill also gave the work a final destination: a grass-and-stone amphitheater at the top with a symbol-rich and sensually expansive vista of the harbor and Lady Liberty. All along, the dancers were accompanied not only by Alonso and her bassoon but also by the amazingly wide-ranging voice of Fay Victor.

Up on top, as the childlike dancers stopped wrangling and hula hooping and settled down on the grass, Victor sang about how she would like to disappear into a welcoming sunset. The setting didn’t entirely oblige — it was a little early — but it helped a lot.

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