

Yanira Castro - 'Beacon'

Alone on the stand

by Holly Messitt

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Yanira Castro's attempt to dislocate and disturb her audience began immediately upon seating at the Brooklyn Lyceum. When we picked up our tickets, we were handed programs tied together with either a blue or white ribbon. Then, as the audience milled around café tables waiting to be seated, ushers announced that people with blue ribbons should exit to the left, people with white ribbons to the right. Until then we did not realize that attendants had deliberately given each person in each party different colored ribbons. Castro organized the audience this way because, she has said, she wanted audience members to experience "Beacon" alone.



Photo by Kevin Kwan

After we separated from our companions, we were directed into four separate cubicles, which Castro termed 'witness boxes,' each enclosed on three sides by heavy red velvet curtains, and we were seated on wooden bleachers. The witness boxes, as well as the lighting, were designed by Roderick Murray. As the curtains rose, harsh overhead lighting turned on directly above each of the four cubicles and the audience was confronted with our own image in the plexiglas surrounding us.

The dancing itself was meant to reflect the same sense of dislocation for which Castro had set the stage through the seating ritual. Four dancers, Nancy Ellis, Heather Olson, Pamela Vail, and María Wethers, completed the cast. Their dance floor was the bottom of Brooklyn Lyceum's abandoned 1911 bathhouse pool. They moved around the bottom of the pool's floor, surrounded by 10-ft walls that lead up to the deck above. The first row of the audience sat at the same level as the dancers, separated from them only by the plexiglass, which would eventually be raised, leaving the first row within inches of the dancers. Raising the glass in the middle of the piece was another tactic Castro used to dislocate and disturb the audience. By doing so, she removed the separation between the audience and the events of horror represented within the piece. Through her use of the plexiglass, Castro challenged our distance from the dancers, and by extension the horror of our world.

Pamela Vail was first to appear. Draped in a thin, transparently white top and wearing tight white shorts, she stood in the left corner of the stage. Her make up suggested beating - her lipstick was smeared in the right corner of her mouth and her eyes were darkened to suggest black eyes. She moved beneath one harsh spotlight from above. Dan Siegler's music, at this point simulating drips of water, played softly in the background. When Vail laid face down on the ground, Olson, Ellis, and Werthers took center stage. Their heavy black coats, designed by Albert Sakhai, were in opposition to Vail's thin white costuming, and their quick, insect-like movement was the very opposite of Vail's tortured but very human movement.

Olson, Ellis, and Werthers enacted both the sinister villains and the victimized. They opened their mouths over and over again in a scream, but there was no sound. This silent screaming continued until the plexiglass lifted and their breath, gasping as if they've taken their first breath after being underwater, became audible. Yet

despite these moments of reaction, they were often brutal with each other and seemed to relish the discomfort they provoked in the audience with their near nakedness once they stripped off their black coats.

When Ellis finally screamed out loud and ran to put on her discarded coat, she signaled what seems to be the beginning of a final effort to escape. Florescent lights lining the back of the pool walls came on and the music turned techno. Olson, Ellis, and Werthers ran in a full circle around the pool, mouths open in the silent scream, but by this time, the tactic has lost some of its charge. Ellis and Werthers turned on Olson. They forcefully pulled her toward the middle of the floor where Vail had moved is as well. In the process they pulled of Olson's wig of ringlet curls that all three wore throughout the piece. Olson and Vail stayed in child's pose in the center of the floor with the wig between them like some dead animal while Ellis and Werthers backed away. They enacted the struggle to escape, climbing at the walls, while the other two remained passive. In the end, Olson, Ellis, and Werthers passively sat or lay on the ground as Vail stood again, a triumph of what is good and human over what is dark and brutal.

Edited by Staff.