

Yanira Castro's Restroom Pas de Deux

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The wait to get into a restroom is often fraught with anticipation, and I was definitely feeling it as I lingered outside the Gershwin Hotel's lobby bathroom last Saturday night — but not for the usual reasons. Just what I would find inside remained unclear; the entrance was blocked by a velvet rope, beyond which lay the setting of Yanira Castro's latest dance installation, *Dark Horse/Black Forest*.

Castro specializes in work that feels more like a personal encounter than a performance, creating environments that don't allow audience members the option of viewing from a safe distance. Her 2005 piece, *Beacon*, for example, placed the audience in Plexiglas-enclosed "viewing pens" designed to create a sense of claustrophobia as they watched the action. Being comfortable is not the point.

That was certainly the case with *Dark Horse*. After being instructed to shed our coats and purses, the eight audience members were ushered into the men's room. Its red walls were lined with fluorescent lights and mirrored panels, and video monitors overhead displayed people in hotel rooms in various positions and states of undress (these were performers, including Castro herself). There was just enough room for us in the 9-by-11 space to squeeze in among the urinals and sink, with a couple of people huddled together in a doorless stall. (If you think the seating at Carnegie Hall is tight, just try watching a performance while pressed up against a wall between two urinals.)

Billed as an intense love story, *Dark Horse* features two rotating casts, a man and a woman (Heather Olson and Joseph Poulson) and two men (Luke Miller and Darrin Wright). Olson and Poulson were performing on Saturday, and intense doesn't even begin to cover what happened between them — and us — during our 45-minute bathroom session.

The couple is having a fight, and Olson's face is a stiff mask of anger. "How about a little smile?" Poulson says, with no response. As the couple spars, through movement and sparse dialogue, we observers gingerly shift around the space to accommodate them. At one point, Poulson rests his head against an audience member's leg, and I begin to freak out a little. Just how much participation will be required of us? And in fact my turn comes just a few minutes later when he starts yelling at each one of us to get out of the bathroom. "Get out!" he shouts in my face. "This isn't part of the performance! I have to take a piss." Tempting as it is to do as he says, I stand still, increasingly sweaty and uncomfortable, as he glares at me. Yikes.

The best moments happen when the dancers ignore us and focus on each other, leaving us in the role of voyeurs witnessing an intimate encounter we're not supposed to see. The emotionally charged yet mundane nature of the couple's quarrel ("Why didn't you call me last night?") is totally familiar to us, as is the slow coming-around, the grudging smile and,

ultimately, the tender reconciliation (even if ours doesn't usually involve cake icing). But Castro filters this familiar narrative through a scrim of strangeness, and her vivid, sometimes disturbing imagery – as when Olson kneels on the tile floor and dips her head in a bucket of water for what seems like an eternity – makes the whole encounter feel like a poem come to life.

When, after stripping to their underwear and performing a formal duet, the two dancers exited the bathroom, it took us a while to realize that the show was over. We stood around, uncertain about what to do next – and, even though the climate in the bathroom was approaching rain forest levels of heat and humidity, I was a little reluctant to leave Castro's eerie landscape.

If you can't make it to the Gershwin for the next round of performances, there are other ways to experience *Dark Horse*; unlike Vegas, what happens in the bathroom doesn't necessarily stay there. Through a related project called [Overheredarkhorse](#), commissioned by Castro's collaborative entity, [a canary torsi](#), you can follow the characters, as reimagined by writer [Rozalia Jovanovic](#), on Twitter at [@doghebitedme](#) and [@darkbloom8](#); listen to them in the Gershwin lobby in a new media project created by artist [Lauren McCarthy](#); and even text conversations you happen to overhear in other public bathrooms. In addition, hotel guests can watch the performances via closed-circuit television in their rooms.

Still, nothing compares to the live experience. If you decide to check it out, take this advice: Wear comfy shoes, dress light, and leave your personal boundaries at the door.

Dark Horse/Black Forest runs through June 28th; [click here](#) for ticketing info.