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## Tere O'Connor and Janis Brenner Celebrate the Life of Dancing

By Deborah Jowitt

I doubt that Janis Brenner was making dances during all five decades of dance that she celebrates in her elegant show at the Joyce Soho; she's not that old. She's honoring her roots, and some important mileposts in her career, in addition to paying tribute to those members of the dance community lost in the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s.



It was as a performer in Meredith Monk's work that Brenner found an outlet for her singing voice, and she opens her Joyce Soho concert by performing Monk's *Break*—created in 1964, when Monk was a 21-year-old upstart, and not seen in New York since 1992. There's no singing in *Break*, only such utterances as an occasional "ow!" or "no." It's a flawless piece—terse and witty—constructed of simple, repetitive, pedestrian moves; long, intense pauses; and calmly presented disturbing images. From the intermittent sounds of a car engine starting up and later of a crash, you can intuit a traffic accident, but Monk deconstructed it in such a way that its very form embodies the notion of fragmentation, of things shattering. At one point, Brenner's disembodied head appears from behind one of two white screens; the head is tipped on its side, and it slowly slides floorward before it's sucked back.

Brenner danced in Murray Louis's company from 1977 to 1984. Aaron Selissen and Sumaya Jackson (coached by Robert Small), admirably recreate two solos from Louis's 1978 *Figura*. These are beautifully made little pieces—buoyant dancing shaped into phrases full of subtle dynamic contrasts. The man's solo is vigorous, the woman's more meditative; Jackson swings her hips from one side to the other as if just discovering the sensuous possibilities of the motion.

The three other pieces on the program are by Brenner; they show both the craftsmanship she learned in her early training with Alwin Nikolais and her own interest in human passions. In her 1985 solo *Guilt*, Kyla Barkin, in Brenner's original role, slams herself around inside a vertical, three-sided wooden box with doorknobs on two unopenable doors, while Marianne Faithfull moans, "I feel good. . . I feel bad." Repetition only intensifies the woman's self-made imprisonment.

*A Matter of Time* (1995), to music by David Karagianis, also starts with a clearly delineated dilemma. Two unhappy couples inhabit two pools of light with diagonal paths leading away from them (lighting design by Mitchell Bogard). In one "house," Selissen controls the struggling Barkin (both wonderfully expressive). In the other, Pam Wagner attempts to rein in Moo Kim. The partners' mouths move in silent argument; they gesture their anger, their helplessness. Interestingly, Barkin and Kim have different ways of striking out along the paths, but over and over, they get retrieved and pulled back in more or less the same way.

Gradually, we see more differences between the two couples as the struggle between possessiveness and a yearning for freedom intensifies. Eventually, when the two wrangling pairs are close to one another—still for a moment—Kim reaches out his hand to caress Barkin’s cheek. You can imagine the rest. Yet, as the lights fade, Barkin, allied with Kim now, is looking back at Selissen.

Many dancers just starting out cannot know those years when AIDS was ravaging the dance world—the days when you’d see beautiful young men, thin and pale, helped down the street as if they were someone’s grandfather. I will never forget the sight of Edward Stierle, a dancer in the Joffrey Ballet, who’d recently begun to display immense promise as a choreographer, walking unsteadily onto the stage during the company’s 1991 season to take a bow for his new *Empyrean Dances*. Three days later, he died at 23.

Brenner conceived *Dancing in Absentia* as a tribute to all the male artists in dance who didn’t survive those terrible decades. Brenner and Michelle Rosen chant a prosaic litany (“I lost a sock, I lost an earring”) and go on to more major losses; that list continues on tape via Bang on a Can’s *Lost Objects*, along with other recorded musical selections by Charlemagne Palestine, by Brenner and Theo Blechman’s “Prayer” from *Mars Cantata*, and by the onstage dancers’ harsh, rhythmic breathing. Carolyn Rossett joins the five others to create Brenner’s plangent visions of people gathering to lift and support others, of repeated embraces that one of the two slips out of, leaving the partner holding air. Segments of the AIDS quilt are projected on the back wall; so are 41 cut-out photos of the dead. These float across the surface, frozen in an endless leap, posing for the camera, healthy, young. Sometimes the images blur and dissolve. In five cases, the men are shown with a colleague; Bill T. Jones remains while Arnie Zane vanishes, Yoshiko Chua is left without Harry Sheppard.

The centerpiece of *Dancing in Absentia* is a powerful duet for Kim and Selissen—angry, passionate, tender. Their companions watch, and the photos stream on. The last picture shows an unknown man, his back to the camera, squatting to peruse the AIDS quilt laid out on the undying grass.