

Ins and Outs

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Keely Garfield, a young English woman who must be one of the funniest choreographers ever, showed her in-progress *Paper Cuts* in December at Musical Theater Works, a little space bravely facing The Public Theater on Lafayette Street in downtown New York (the full piece is scheduled to premiere at Dia Center for the Arts April 17-19). Garfield's new piece (or what I saw of it) is about dance effect and dance convention — about the way musical rhythm is revised by dance, and the way dancing can signal unexpected meanings in the music and in the semantics of gesturing. "If my life is a soap opera," Garfield has said, "then music is the dialogue." *Paper Cuts* is funny in a way that is hard to describe or explain, like slapstick or preposterous jokes. Both Garfield and Rachel Lynch-John, the other dancer in the piece, are excellent performers as comics and as dancers. Lynch-John begins the piece by coming center stage to unfurl an entire roll of toilet paper, wildly "in time" with the overture to *Carmen*. Several cadences in the music are ignored, and then some weaker ones are noted when Lynch-John rips off the paper, and then resumes her manic task. When the music is over — the biggest cadence, thus contrasting with the others — the dancer snaps off the end of the roll and bends over to pick up the ribbons, turns and walks offstage. It's a marvelous, hilarious act that no genius ever thought of before Garfield did, and it seems somehow to have a great deal of dance in it. As this opening schtick goes forward, its funniness and, better yet, its beauty appears, like a brilliant wit's personality.

Garfield's method is to juxtapose simple, unexpected elements in deadpan flatness. She assumes the significance of conventional gestures (musical, dance, and human) and uses them to reflect their own effectiveness — for example,

later in the piece Garfield uses the bunches of tissue as a long, fluttering scarf on her shoulders when she dances to the Habanera, and while the scarf begins to look like a pair of strange wings, Garfield still manages to make use of the prop as a scarf in a purely glamorous and sexy way. The conflict is between the conventional usage and the metaphorical, or transcendent, revision.

But doing surprising things to known behavior is only one of Garfield's many tricks. (Another kind of trick is putting them all together into a real dance, which she does with a fascinating light touch — she never repeats an effect for emphasis — and produces a very fast tempo of ideas.) She goes down on hands and knees in *Paper Cuts* and Lynch-John covers her with the toilet paper: she becomes a solitary rock, or a mossy trunk in a lonely landscape upon which Lynch-John, now Albrecht to the music of *Giselle*, sits and suffers the loss of his true love, who is beneath him in at least two senses. And in the single richest and most hilarious moment of the piece, Garfield wraps one leg in toilet paper and, suffering a concurrent gushing (imaginary) nosebleed, croaks a short, horrible noise that's expressive of all pain and suffering — it's like magic.

Garfield is among the least spectacular of choreographers in terms of so-called production values; she prefers the look of a dirty black-box stage, which she transforms into a surprising resource. Her use of sexiness is similar — both she and Lynch-John are attractive young women, but Garfield would seem to believe that, perhaps *because* they are so appealing, she mustn't let that be a proffered element in the work. The physical beauty of both women is always underplayed, as if not played at all. Which, of course, makes them both wildly sexy, because they're not "being" sexy. Anything Garfield "uses" becomes funny and "real" in an openly theatrical sense; in *Paper Cuts* the female sexuality onstage is treated not as material but as the origin or source of all material — the first cause of the absurd, so to speak. Sex underlies everything in Garfield's work, as it does everywhere — but quietly, without diminishing its potency by calling attention to itself.

Ben Munisteri's new *Forbidden Zone* which was seen at P. S. 122 in November (and went completely unreviewed by the daily and weekly