



# Trajal Harrell, Pam Tanowitz and other APAP Showcases Turn New York Into One Big Runway

By Deborah Jowitt  
published: January 19, 2010

Look around. People bolting snacks and coffee wave at others across the lobby. They say things like, “I haven’t seen you since the festival in Dublin, or, wait, was it in Monaco that we had pasta together? How are things going in Minneapolis?”



These are not jet-setters; they’re the game, weary people in town for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters’ annual conference, and they’re stoking up for what may be the third showcase they’ve attended today. They’re here, of course, to discuss funding for the arts and audience building. Every dance company in town—and some from overseas—tries to be seen during APAP week, hoping that these people aren’t just window-shopping. At least 11 New York dance venues host showcases, with most companies offering excerpts on shared programs.

Choreographers and dancers catch up on what their peers are doing; critics look in on what they missed and what they hope not to miss in the future. Also what they’re thrilled to see again. David Parker’s *Bang*, brilliantly performed by Jeffrey Kazin and Nic Petry, turns the slam of body against body against the floor into a revelation not just of sophisticated percussive virtuosity, but of a two-man relationship. This was on a percussion marathon at Symphony Space, where other standouts were Joseph Webb’s powerful tapping and beguiling hosting of *Thank You Gregory*, a tribute to Gregory Hines staged by Tony Waag; the beautifully serene and precise leaps by Irish step dancer Timothy Kochka in Darrah Carr’s *RhythmOTION* and *Step Dance Suite*; and an excerpt from *Buckets and Tap Shoes* by the Minneapolis-based musician-dancers Andy and Rick Ausland, who are as sharp with their laid-back patter as they are with their feet.

Sometimes excerpts leave you in the dark as to what the whole work is or will be. This can be fine if it whets your appetite to see more. I’m not likely to miss David Dorfman’s *Prophets of Funk—Dance to the Music of Funk*, when it finally becomes a full-evening work in two years (Dorfman in league with Sly and the Family Stone? Irresistible). A 17-minute excerpt from Julian Barnett’s solo with mirrors, *Echologue* (like Dorfman’s work, shown on one of three showcases at Danspace), makes me want to see the whole piece.

Lucky for me, I was able to take in two pieces in their entirety and fully staged: Trajal Harrell’s *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (S)*, which premiered at Danspace last October, and Pam Tanowitz’s *Be in the Gray With Me*, first shown at Dance Theater Workshop in

June.

Only seconds after Harrell's performance at the New Museum begins, I decide to forgive him for referring to "the autofictional potentiality of the performer" in his program note. OK, the concept behind the piece is brainy, but it emerges far more clearly and entrancingly in the elegant solo he created for himself. He's not, by the way, the first choreographer to be intrigued by Judson Dance Theater's radical work in the '60s (or by the relics and myths trailing it, since he's too young to have seen it); in 1992, another formidably smart and witty choreographer, Doug Elkins, premiered a dance titled *Where Was Yvonne Rainer When I Had Saturday Night Fever?* Harrell's question to himself as he began work on *Twenty Looks* was "What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns in Judson Church?"

He doesn't want to answer that question literally. Rather—like Rainer and her colleagues (Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon et al.)—he queries the nature of performance. It's worth remembering, too, that, although Rainer's famous 1965 manifesto said "NO" to spectacle, glamour, and virtuosity, she later investigated them in her 1968 *The Mind Is a Muscle*—by having her performers, with their everyday, no-big-deal manners, share the stage, in one scene, with a showy professional juggler. In *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* two years later, she included readings of film notables' memories, as well as juxtaposing process to performance (the raw meets the cooked).

*Twenty Looks* begins before it "begins." Harrell is laying out his changes of wardrobe on six chairs and greeting the spectators as they find seats on three sides of the New Museum's black-box theater. It's he who hands out the programs that list what those 20 looks are and educate us via short essays on "The Voguing Dance Tradition" and "The Postmodern Dance Tradition" in English, French, and Dutch. The black runway laid out on the floor has a temporary air—as if it's more for a photo shoot than for either a fashion show or the Harlem ball scene that reinvented those designer presentations. The strip of marly is clothespinned up to a low fence at the back and ends in a roll at the feet of one bank of spectators.

Throughout the piece, Harrell juggles such dualities as reality vs. performance, what's might be considered entertaining and what boring, and "hot" material siphoned through cool presentation. Is watching him efficiently but unhurriedly change his attire downtime, or a suspenseful part of the show?

Some of the "looks" are just that: a glimpse. We watch Harrell garb himself for Look 1, "West Coast Preppy School Boy," adding an untucked blue-gray shirt, a tie, and a yellow rain jacket over his black T-shirt and pants, sticking his feet into flip-flops, and donning dark glasses against the California sun. He doesn't even get near the runway, just stands and gives us a sullen stare. On to 2. All his fashion images are ironic, witty—managing to be both apt and enigmatic. The scenes gradually take up more space, present more movement, and become more difficult to decode. Checking our lists against the numbers that Harrell hangs on a chair to announce each scene, trying to guess how each skillful costume adjustment will turn out makes spectatorship a game, with time to exchange chuckles with the person in the next seat.

Harrell's subtly brilliant—a master of the sultry stroll, the aggressive stride, the arrogant set of the jaw. But *Twenty Looks* is a cultural critique, not a take-off on *Top Model*, '60s-style. Parsing the look and its title are part of the fun. For "Eau de Jean Michel," he sits on a chair and rearranges his footwear, finally picking up and sniffing a running shoe before moving on. For "Serving Old-

School Runway,” he combines gold high-tops with a loose gray T-shirt and an apron that shows what could be a photo of 1960s art celebs eating. His gestures are as languid as a British monarch’s wave.

Pieces of clothing are re-cycled (the apron becomes a cape in “Serving Superhero” and flaps obligingly behind him as he sort of flies around). Various snatches of music appear and disappear. So does the sound of feet walking on a hard floor. Not until the untitled Look 11 do the bright runway lights come on. In Look 13, “Legendary Face,” he wears shades and hides his visage as he moves, bending and twisting, about the space, before turning that face toward the limelight. Garbo? Could be. Or not. Just as his caved-in body, bundled-up apron, and silent weeping in a stretchy black dress in “Moderne” (Look 18) could as easily allude to modern dance as to the memoir of an art-gallery guard we hear on tape. Look 20 (along with 17 and 19, the sections with the most movement) is titled “Alt-Moderne feeling the French Lieutenant’s Woman”; he could one second be channeling Martha Graham and the next Meryl Streep gazing out to sea. (That’s not it, Trajal? Never mind, it’s sort of it, isn’t it? Structurally speaking?)

I love watching Harrell indicate styles—now with down-and-dirty swiveling hips, now with weaving, undulating arms and soft stroking-the-air hands, now with high-stepping feet. Every pose resonates. In 17, “Runway Performance With Facial Expressions,” he makes a hurt look seem as detached as any other step.

Note the parenthetical “S” that’s part of the title of this entrancing work. In the world of both high and low fashion, that indicates size. Theoretically, Harrell may go on to create four versions of the piece. *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (M)* is due to premiere at the Kitchen later this year or in 2011. I can hardly wait.

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Pam Tanowitz studied extensively with Viola Farber, one of Merce Cunningham’s original dancers, and the three men appearing in *Be in the Gray With Me* are current or former members of Cunningham’s company. As you might expect, her choreography features articulate feet, long body lines, and movement that tells its own stories. Everything she puts onstage is intriguing, often surprising, and resonant in its implications of human behavior. You may recognize certain movements as balletic—pas de chats, say, or cabrioles—but they don’t have a hand-me-down look. In fact, in this piece, certain passages seem to quote historical ballets and turn them upside down; it’s interesting to note that three of the four composers (Vladimir Martynov, Pavel Karmonov, Alexander Raskatov, and Dan Siegler) are Russian, and Raskatov’s *The Season Digest* is described as being “after Tchaikovsky.”

The Russian connection may have prompted several fetching moments. At one point, the six women dancers in the piece are clustered in a corner, standing at attention, watching Dylan Crossman solo. Uta Takemura leaves the others and holds Crossman’s hand, while he balances on half-toe, the other leg lifted slightly to the side. One by one, the others replace her at this job. The passage alludes to Petipa’s “Rose Adagio” from *Sleeping Beauty*, except when the last woman, Anne Lentz, starts to rotate Crossman, he picks her up instead. Shortly after this, he sits, and each woman enters and dances briefly for him, as if he were being asked to choose a bride. Somewhat later, he’s again on the floor, in a pose reminiscent of Nijinsky in his *Afternoon of a Faun*. Takemura whisks on and off the stage, looking at him like a hesitant nymph, and Theresa Ling performs (for him?), while he makes his fingers dance on the floor, as if he were marking out her steps.

Philip Treviño's set design consists of gray, translucent hanging on three sides of the stage, with three doorways on either side; later an additional backdrop falls to suggest a colonnade. The choreography emphasizes the porousness of these walls by using the space beyond them. Suddenly you notice Ellie Kusner walking in an exterior corridor. The costumes by Renée Kurz are mostly gray, partly satin, and draped in various ways. But Treviño's magical and impulsive lighting turns this monochromatic world pink, partly blue, and at one point entirely red.

It is a world, and an intriguing one. The performers come and go about their enigmatic errands—mostly serene, yet vividly present in the movement, and always aware of one another. They dance marvelously—in pairs, alone, in groups, in unison or in counterpoint, never staying in one situation for long. Tanowitz lets you see the differences among the three men (Crossman, Glen Rumsey, and Rashaun Mitchell) and the distinctive virtues of, say, small Christina Amendolia and tall, lanky Ashlie Kittelson. We live with them for 55 minutes, almost every one of which enlightens us.

The 2010 APAP is over and gone. Let's hope, when the dust and glitter and sweat settle, that some companies get more work than they dared hope for and that far-flung audiences learn to love them.

*Correction: In my recently posted review of New York City Ballet, I gave David H. Koch, for whom the New York State Theater has been re-named, the wrong middle initial.*

**Miana Grafals**



Trajal Harrell in his "Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (S)"

Details:

**Trajal Harrell**  
The New Museum of  
Contemporary Art

January 7 through 8

**Pam Tanowitz**

Dance Theater Workshop

January 10 through 11

**APAP week showcases and  
performances**

Various venues

January 7 through 11