

Uncomfortable Fantasies

Jacob Wren on Antonija Livingstone's *The Part*

Sometimes in certain social situations – at a dinner party at which I don't know anyone or on a bad blind date – I feel like I'm auditioning. More specifically, I feel like I'm auditioning despite the fact that no one has asked me to audition and clearly there is no job at stake. It is one of the ways I know that I am particularly (i.e. extremely) uncomfortable: that already I am framing my social discomfort in the language of performance and more specifically within that aspect of 'the performance world' I find most distasteful: the audition.

But already I am uncomfortable with this first paragraph. I am suspicious of the distanced yet confessional tone. (I leave it in only so you can taste my discomfort, a discomfort I believe is extremely relevant to the work under discussion.) I will begin again.

When I am watching a bad dance or theatre performance I often feel like the performers aren't really *in* the work but are instead auditioning to be in other, better, future works made by other directors and choreographers. That they have already given up on the work they are currently in, but they most certainly have not given up on *their own* performance, since they have not given up on the vague (perhaps unrealistic) hope that someone in the audience will spot them and cast them in something better. And yes, it is only human, of course they are trying to save themselves (and everyone else can go straight to hell.) And yes, as an audience member I try my best to forgive them but at the same time it always makes me extremely uncomfortable.

I find myself even more uncomfortable if I happen to find these hypothetical performers – who I am slandering here by suggesting their performances are little more than life-rafts or auditions – to be sexually attractive (which I of course often do.) It is possible that for a moment I feel they are not only auditioning to be in my work, since I do sometimes cast performers I see in other people's shows, but also auditioning to be in my bed. They are not. This is of course a complete fantasy. It is perhaps a dirty fantasy, an ugly one. Or maybe it is only a mental drift into the realm of seduction and therefore hot. But it is most certainly (for me at least) an *uncomfortable* fantasy because it aggressively devalues so many of the artistic aspects of the performance in front of me. Such questionable discomfort, and such far-ranging play with fantasy, is very much the terrain upon which Antonija Livingstone builds her work *The Part*, a piece that frequently flirts with seduction while at the same time destabilizing the social roles within which seduction most often finds its home.

The discomfort I feel watching performers whom I imagine to be auditioning and the discomfort I feel on a bad date, where my mannerisms suddenly take on the taint of a badly conceived audition, are of course different edges of the same blade. As has often been commented upon, social roles and performative 'roles' share many of the same traits and fascinations. There are ways you behave at work and ways you behave at a party, just as there are ways you behave in ballet and ways you behave in conceptual dance. In *The Part* many such roles are inhabited, questioned, transgressed and emptied of meaning, slyly re-packed with new meanings, new non-meanings and unexpected (queer) sexual energies, at times only slightly removed from the conventional but nonetheless continuously intertwined, interchanged and blurring, allowed to freely slide towards the unexpected and towards unexpected combinations of the social conventions that we (wrongly) feel we know far too well.

Conventional social roles, and conventional roles of seduction, are boxes in which no one ever feels completely comfortable and which (almost) no one genuinely enjoys? Ironically we might even state that this is in fact the point. Such discomfort is designed to make one feel inadequate, try harder to fit in, concentrate not on how society is letting you down but rather on how you are failing to live up to normative, social ideals. Such normative and conventional roles are in many ways tools for auditioning, tools to work towards being accepted within a larger social framework. And yet, if one chooses, they are also perfect material for free and anarchic play. In fact, even the most conventional of lives is always also a process of twisting and transforming such roles in order to make them ones own.

The world of *The Part* is a place in which the subtle twisting of normative conventions has spun completely out of control, in which all the re-invention of a lifetime is uncomfortably crammed into one hour, never quite fitting, always threatening to collapse inwards upon itself or outwards towards the audience. A world in which the conventional roles of seduction never quite seduce, instead sliding freely towards unexpected realms of identity-shifting confusion.

Because here is the stupid, fucking deal about modern life: it is difficult to get anything done in this world without auditioning. And it is difficult to audition without playing a part. And the world of *The Part* revels in the polymorphous perversity of these tenuous facts. While at the same time completely, and gloriously, rejecting them.