

# PHILLY IS DANCING

Thursday night I saw the [Rosie Herrera Dance Theater](#) perform at the [Annenberg Center for Performing Arts](#) as part of [Dance Affiliates' Dance Celebration series](#).

I went intending to write a review of my experience afterwards. Instead, I've decided to write two reviews.

The performance was made up of two pieces, the first entitled "Dining Alone," and the second titled "[Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret](#)." Though the two shared some themes (at least in my interpretation), my emotions and my reactions to the two pieces differed so starkly that I'm splitting my review in half as well.

## Part 1: Review of Rosie Herrera Dance Theater's "Dining Alone"

Some dance performances have primarily aesthetic goals. The audience leaves the theater in awe of how high the leaps were, and how many perfect turns there were. A storyline may be weaved in between the impressive technique, but the story is not the main attraction, the dancing is.

Other, more contemporary, and more experimental dance performances rely on a story, or at least a deeper theme to engage and even challenge the artistic mind of the viewers. In this, the director runs the risk of miscommunication with the viewer. *Will the viewer understand the purpose of this piece? Will the viewer comprehend the feelings being conveyed through the dance?* The more indirect the "storyline," the greater the risk, but many directors are happy to take this risk for the sake of bold artistry.

The Rosie Herrera Dance Theater is definitely an example of the latter, which makes sense, seeing as it is a *Dance Theater* group, not just a dance company. It is also an example of a performance that took risks in delivering its story. It was wide-open to interpretation.

These questions came to mind; *Do you have to understand a dance performance in order to appreciate it? What does it even mean to "understand" dance?*

I have no idea if I, or the other audience members, understood "Dining Alone" the way that Herrera meant it to be understood. Did Herrera even *mean* for it to be fully understood? Does she *care* if we understand it?

I do know that I understood "Dining Alone" differently than my friend who accompanied me to the show. I also know that I understood it differently than other writers who have reviewed this piece (and presented their interpretations as fact... snarkily implying that if your interpretation differs from theirs, you're mistaken...eek!).

In "Dining Alone" I saw elements of submission and control, loneliness and longing, and of personal struggle with identity. In every mention of the Rosie Herrera Dance Theater, be it in reviews, previews, promotions, etc., Herrera's Miami roots (and sometimes her father's Cuban descent) are always mentioned. Certainly the Latin music paid homage to her upbringing, and I understood the personal conflict one undergoes as a "server" (be it in a restaurant or a personal relationship) painted by the colors of Latino culture.

While my friend understood the piece differently than I did, there were things in common that we both really liked about "Dining Alone." Herrera's use of plates as props was very interesting, and well executed. White plates reappeared throughout "Dining Alone" and were not just used as visuals during the show, but also as audible instruments. The spinning of a plate on the floor that gets faster and faster and faster until it suddenly stops. The crashing of breaking plates. The rolling, stacking and sliding of plates. The plates became part of the metaphorical story as well.

One of my favorite parts of "Dining Alone" was a dance that five performers did in unison, using multiple plates. The plates didn't just serve as props, they actually changed the way the performers danced, because they were able to glide on the plates in a way that wouldn't have been possible without them. It was a graceful, intriguing dance.

We liked how unique and unpredictable the performance was; we laughed out loud in many parts, and were drawn in, intensely curious, in other parts. We liked the use of various audio and visual elements, and the music itself. It was definitely *not* an easily forgotten performance.

Despite the fact that we both interpreted the piece differently, and perhaps both in a way unintended by Herrera, we enjoyed being part of the audience in "Dining Alone," and would see it again.

So, to answer my own question, *no*. You don't have to "get" a dance in one particular way or another to appreciate it. I walked away with one interpretation, my own. **The performance, and the way that I interpreted it, evoked emotion in me, it made me question, it made me curious, it made me laugh, and it engaged me. These reactions are at the core of a successful artistic experience.**

I applaud [Dance Affiliates](#) for bringing such a unique piece to the [Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#), and I am grateful that I got to experience "Dining In," which broadened my thinking and my conception of dance.

## **Part 2: Review of Rosie Herrera Dance Theater's "Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret"**

Herrera's "The Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret" happened to me.

I didn't just view it, an audience member in control of my emotions and my environment, removed from what was happening on stage. Just the opposite; I felt surrounded by it, I felt my emotions were out of my control, and I felt violated by it.

That's right; *I felt violated by dance.*

Good art evokes emotion. Herrera most definitely achieves this task, almost overbearingly. The piece is made up of a series of vignettes, but one "vignette" overshadowed the rest of the piece so darkly that it's hard for me to think of the whole piece in any other way. This "vignette" began with a woman in a tutu and underwear flirting with three men. They lift her up and sit her on a birthday cake. She first responds by giggling uncontrollably, finding it to be a guilty pleasure. The men continue lifting her up and sitting her on more cakes and she keeps giggling until she isn't giggling anymore. She shifts to being uncomfortable, and finally to screaming violently "No quiero! No me toques!" ("I don't want to! Don't touch me!"). After the last cake is smashed by her crotch, the men leave her on stage. She continues to sob violently, stands up as frosting falls from the inside of her naked thighs to the floor, and looks at the audience in disbelief, regret and desperation.

We had all watched as she was violated, and now she was staring at us. In fact, we had laughed, as her flirtations turned into a violation, and now she stared.

After an intensely uncomfortable minute, a masked, hooded man stole her off the stage, grabbing her like an animal. Then, as if the scene needed to be any creepier, a young girl entered the stage in a bathing suit, staring at the audience, and is then lifted into a claw-footed bathtub.

To say the feeling in the room was uncomfortable is a gross understatement. Two couples left. And I don't think that they left for a lack of talent on the part of Herrera, but because of the utterly disturbing sensation the audience shared after this scene. It was simply, understandably, too much for some in the audience.

As I said, this was just one vignette in many. Before this scene, there was a fun, lively, poppy group dance, there was a comedic drag reenactment of Celine Deon's "My Heart Will Go On" which had me laughing, a possessive duet between two men to "Baby It's Cold Outside" and others.

The light-heartedness of these scenes only added to the feeling of violation in the cake scene. A friend who accompanied me to the show remarked, "I feel tricked. I didn't give her permission to do that to me. We were all laughing, and then all of a sudden... that!"

The fact that different audience members stopped laughing at the "cake scene" at different times made it even more disturbing. *Don't they see it's a rape?* some audience members thought to themselves, uncomfortably, as others were still laughing. In the end, of course, no one was laughing. In fact, the theater was dead silent. After the young girl in the bathtub left the stage, one dancer performed a dark, beautiful solo.

The piece ended with one of the performers washing the face and the body of another who had previously appeared in drag, until the make-up had worn off. As the cast members slowly fell backwards to the floor (or inside of the tub), a video screen appeared, and we watched the full cast on a life-raft, slip into the water, and slowly, poetically, beautifully drown.

Every performance has an objective. I would love to know Herrera's objective with this piece (although, of course, that would ruin the experience!). I felt angry (seriously! anger!) after the show. *Why did she show that to me? What was her aim? To upset me? To make me feel violated?* (As I said, the "cake scene" overshadowed everything else for me).

But, if the "objective" of any piece of art is to evoke emotion, then Herrera certainly succeeded. **In fact, I don't think I've ever had such a strong reaction to a performance. It's intriguing to think about how our feelings can be so manipulated by a group of strangers on a stage.**

I have seen art before in which characters were violated, but I understood the context of the violation and how it served the larger story. With this show, I couldn't follow an overriding storyline, so the violation left me bewildered and seemed to lack merit in my mind.

"The Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret" is not for everyone. There is no straightforward storyline. It is disturbing. However, Herrera is talented at drawing in an audience, and creating a whole-body, visceral experience that is certainly unforgettable.