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Rosie Herrera's fraught, irony-edged solo is her most personal piece yet



Rosie Herrera performs her solo dance theater piece "Cookie's Kid" at the Miami Light Project space in Wynwood. **Carl Juste** MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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Cookie's Kid, the first solo piece by the always intriguing Rosie Herrera, has many of the same ingredients as her group works: the lusciously beautiful images; the pop iconography; the disorienting swings from self-conscious camp to desperation. But Thursday's opening performance at the Miami Light Project space also contained long danced passages in which Herrera seemed to have made a psychological excavation of her own body - intense, interior, opaque.

Though Herrera's [inspiration for this solo](#) was her relationship with her brutally tough mother, who taught her children that you had to literally fight your way through life, there's no overt autobiography in *Cookie's Kid*. Herrera doesn't tell any fraught or funny tales from her childhood. Instead, personal and cultural history seem to ricochet inside her. At one point she literally vibrates, as exuberance becomes out-of-control anguish.



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Cookie's Kid opens with white light on a rippling cord curtain at the back of the stage, through which we intermittently glimpse Herrera, slowly walking in a lacy, old-fashioned white dress, like an elusive ghost or memory. (David Ferri did the richly articulated lighting design, and Gustavo Casanova the often-opulent costumes.) She emerges into a segment that recalls her mother's violent, abused childhood. A black and white snapshot is projected on the back of Herrera's mother, sitting with her own sullen mother and siblings. Abrupt gestures ripple through Herrera's body, defiant and defensive by turns: She reaches, recoils, puts her hands up as if to shield herself but also tenses them into fists, stretching out on the floor to eye the audience defiantly as she strikes an arm-wrestling pose. The voice of Herrera's grandfather echoes in a crackly recording, talking with children, singing plaintively in Spanish "why do you doubt my love?" Judging by the way Herrera wraps her arms around her head, backing fearfully into her mother's image to disappear again, there was good reason.

As if to flee or mock that painful backstory, she takes on exaggerated Latin melodrama, mirroring her own escape into performing. There's a video of her posing in luxe '50s film star makeup. She steps out in a glittery tight red gown, vamping to a kittenish Eartha Kitt song while whipping up a smoothie in a red blender. She pulls a man out of the audience (it was Luis Cuevas, a member of Herrera's company, but both Cuevas and the stage manager swore his participation wasn't planned) and has him imitate her extravagant poses and translate as she lip-synchs a sultry Rocio Jurado ballad. She has Cuevas act out her narration of a cliché life story — birth, mommy, family, death — and then exaggeratedly mimes the final scene from *West Side Story* over his body, mouthing Maria's angry declarations "You all killed him! Now I have hate, too."

She has love, too, judging by a brief and exquisitely tender video of a little girl being carried down the street. (All the videos were by Adam Reign and Rudi Goblen.) But that instant of sweetness gives way to chaos —Herrera, in shiny purple fringed jumpsuit, dancing to the songs of La Lupe, the diva of gloriously uncontrolled emotional pain. At first she jumps and shimmies, but then she's scratching at her face, rubbing her body with her long hair, weeping as exuberant hip shaking becomes a frantic vibration she can't seem to stop. "What can I do? What is enough?" howls La Lupe, as Herrera collapses face down on the floor.

Cookie's Kid ends with dreamily beautiful, irony-edged redemption. Another film, of blurry, sensual figures swaying in glowing light, which gives way to a saintly, white-cloaked Herrera in a flower-filled bower, while a soaring female voice sings *Ave Maria*. Without giving away the startling final image, it's the kind of jarring, deadpan nonsequitur that Herrera often uses to sharply disturbing effect. It feels a little off here. As in the rest of *Cookie's Kid*, there's a sense that Herrera hasn't quite come to terms with the emotional depths she's exploring, or how to reconcile such intimate material with the richly campy and provocative imagery of her imagination. But her unease is also revealing, part of an unsettling and compelling journey.