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Unsafe Unsuit Review SF Bay Times 1995

Boys on the Sly: "Unsafe, Unsuit"

*Ishmael Houston-Jones, Patrick Scully and
Keith Hennessy at the Bay Area Dance Series.*

BY UNA SHAHMED

There's something a little funny about taking notes at a performance. It's totally dark usually, and you're frantically shifting your gaze from stage to notepad, to notepad, which results in a sort of single head-nodding dance. To top it all off if you're like me, your handwriting is so voluted to begin with that the lack of it and constant re-focusing of the eyes results in a new breed of hieroglyphic. Like, did I write "beautiful stillness of dance against ing," transcendent," or "bountiful nessy dame against tally, transgender"? I'm looking over my notes of "Unsafe, Unsuit," the exciting collaborative improvisation of Patrick Scully, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Keith Hennessy preceded by the Bay Area Dance Series at land's Lancy College, and I am realizing that I must have been in a free-jazz state of mind. It's not terribly surprising, considering that this queer performance offered image after image in a luge of emotional and often incisive commentary about queer maleness and injury, the sometimes tenuous and delicate sometimes explosive nature of trust, the horror and needless ambiguity surrounding the Aaron Williams case. (You

know, the one where Williams, an African American, died in police custody to the tune of "Yeah, we're looking into it," by police officials. Sound familiar?)

Scully hails from Minneapolis and Houston-Jones from New York. Along with local fave Hennessy, the three are no strangers to improvisation, which explains their ability to stay afloat given the sheer wealth of information that comes across in this performance. Clad in business suits and dress shoes, they begin simply in three separate white spotlights, with Houston-Jones spinning in place as Scully and Hennessy stand solid. Soon Hennessy is off and running, pausing by Scully, who is slowly undressing, for enough time to steal his jacket and launch into one of many ongoing renditions of "Mary Had A Little Lamb." It's quickly clear that the main guideline of the improvisational structure is *anything goes*.

Once again refer to my notes, "themes of clouseau, gust ply off of car others." Hm. Maybe what I meant was "themes of clowning, great play off of each other." As is often the case with improvisation, especially the kind that permits rolling and manipulating each others' sweaty and insistent bodies, a sense of playfulness and spontaneity rings through loud and clear. The suits and ties go from being corporate armor to seductive and lusty drag, as Houston-Jones pulls off Scul-

ly's tie in a tearoom tango. Or earlier, as Hennessy jumps about the stage on the sides of his dress shoes in Pee-Wee Herman ankle-breaking fashion. Scully prophesies at a microphone: "This is how it will be after the last sound, this is how it will be after the last vision..." in a deep, sonorous voice transforming the comic into the holy.

This kind of transformation is one of the really wonderful things about improvisation, and about theater, really. When impulses collide and chances are taken, you can't help but watch with anticipatory and sometimes mesmerized eyes. It doesn't always pan out as you might hope; there are a fair number of moments in "Unsafe, Unsuit" that linger on the self-indulgent, or just plain linger when you want it to move on.

What keeps "Unsafe, Unsuit" alive is the performers' abilities to detect these moments and add another element or shift gears. At one point, Hennessy states, "I feel ready to talk about something which isn't happening here," before introducing the topic of Aaron Williams' arrest and subsequent death in police custody. He enumerates the many sociopolitical ramifications that this event has, and just when it begins to get preachy Scully starts belting "If you don't like it, you can leave!" over and over. Houston-Jones silently advances from and

retreats to the back of the stage in a perversely beautiful study of pathetic inability to decide what exactly to do.

The night I saw it, the performance was heavily text-driven in terms of context. The admission of the Aaron Williams issue really steered the piece into a specific direction which, to their credit, didn't disappear from its initial utterance. They later enact several possible versions of the arrest, switching roles between cops and arrestee, and it almost looks like a hardcore s/m scene. At this point, the characters had naturally emerged throughout the evening. Scully as myth-making storyteller, Houston-Jones as movement catalyst, and Hennessy as conscience and resident absurdist, give way suddenly to a free-for-all of power and abuse. It's a risky moment, and not an altogether resolved one. We're left to wonder, what does it mean that these three fags are doing this to each other?

That question is left unanswered, yet the affirmation of their queerness as license to reveal the *inappropriate truth* or the *unwatchable transgression* is a joyous sight indeed. And let me tell you, seeing queens onstage sweat, spit on each other, and then spray their water bottles on stage in haphazard lanes so that they can then shiide across them naked it, well, it's just "grof for she mole," uh, I mean, good for the soul. ▼