thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Whitney Casal

Spilt Milk: Unearthing Conversational Clashes

by Kalila Kingsford-Smith

Spilt Milk, a duet performed and choreographed by Whitney Casal and Ella Cuda, explores interpersonal conflict, disagreement, changing the subject, gossiping, and faking interest. Interlacing sinewy dance and spoken text, this work is both comedic and serious, touching on themes of miscommunication, competition, appropriation, white fragility, and difference.

The performers race each other across the space, lunging and rolling between sprints. I hear their heavy panting. Confronting each other at the center of the space, they speak simultaneously as they pivot back and forth. “Doesn’t it feel good when you get a chance to insert your opinion into the conversation?” “Doesn’t it feel bad when you speak and everything you say seems to be ignored?” A poetic overlap occurs, some phrases converging, others conflicting, creating a cacophony of half-heard arguments about what it’s like to talk to someone you disagree with. They repeat the script faster and louder, pivoting closer together, until they stand, nose-to-nose, yelling at the top of their lungs. The air is thick in the silence that follows.

Standing side-by-side, the dancers perform in gentle unison. They lift their heels, bend their knees, swing their arms forward and lunge to the side. As they repeat this phrase, Casal says, “Why is it ‘sexy’ when women are ambitious? When you see a man taking shit into his own hands, you don’t tell him, ‘You are so sexy.’” Cuda replies, “I know what you mean, but it’s also good to feel sexy. I just bought these really cute rain boots. They have a heel on them.” She raises her heels off the ground. As they talk, not exactly discussing the same thing, their movements fall out of sync. On the surface it sounds like peaceful chatter between friends, but I sense an undercurrent of frustration and difference.

After contrasting these conversations with abstract duets and solos, they sit cross-legged, mirroring each other as they lean forward and back. In a recording, we hear them read Robin DiAngelo's essay on white fragility. Their subtle gestures allow for the recorded contentto take focus.

Casal and Cuda's movement dynamics are soft and relatively unchanging as they stretch, spiral, and slink into the floor. Many significant moments in *Spilt Milk* are conveyed through spoken language, and I question whether their abstract dance content could also express conflict and miscommunication.

They speak simultaneously in high inflections. "Hi!" "I haven't seen you in so long!" "What have you been up to?" "You're the fakest bitch I know!" "It's so good to see you!" "I never want to see you again!" I chuckle at this—the inauthentic subtext beneath shallow conversations. We all fundamentally desire to be understood, but so few dialogues actually get there. *Spilt Milk* effectively unearths these subtle interpersonal clashes.

Spilt Milk, Whitney Casal and Ella Cuda, Riva Health + Wellness, Sept 9-10.

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