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## ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, KEELY KEELY GARFIELD SEARCHES FOR A DIVINE UNION.

By Gia Kourlas

In 2007, while hiking in Alaska where she was choreographing the musical *Yeast Nation: The Triumph of Life*, Keely Garfield found herself face-to-face with a black bear. "As I came around the bend, she was as big as a Subaru," Garfield says. "She was ten feet away and started to walk toward me. I was in total awe of her magnificence, and I started chanting in Sanskrit at the top of my lungs, as you do when you're a yoga teacher." The bear suddenly ran into the woods; Garfield recalls that she fell to the ground, weeping.

"As hokey as it sounds, I felt things shift," she says. "There's a lot of thinking that an animal totem of some sort will appear in your life as a harbinger of information, and the bear, on the one hand, represented a period in my life—I was entering into a hibernation of the soul. But she also left some of her courage. Since that moment, I feel pretty fearless. It doesn't mean I don't get scared, but deep down it's not really the same. It's definitely like, 'Don't fuck with me.'"

Garfield's period of hibernation—at least artistically speaking—didn't last long. The following spring she choreographed the first of three new works—the acclaimed *Limerence*, an intimate dance exploring the enigmatic, liminal cracks within a landscape of shadow and light. The piece is actually the final work in a trilogy, premiering this weekend at *Danspace Project*, which begins with *First Attempt* (in which the choreographer focuses on saving the planet and impersonates David Bowie) and *Eva Potranspiration/Cloud 9* (here, she attempts to save humanity with a cast that includes her eight-year-old daughter, Vivian Ra). In the concluding *Limerence*, Garfield creates an intuitive, performative world for three dancers—Omagbitse Omagbemi, Brandin Stoffensen and herself—as well as the lighting designer, Jonathan Belcher; together, they strive to reach a state of union.

"In *Limerence*, we try to save God," Garfield says matter-of-factly. She takes a deep breath: "The longing-for-union thing unites all the parts of my life. There's the quest for union with the greater self through the yoga practice; there's the longing for union with my family and my friends and for the person I used to be and the person I am now; as a performer, there's a longing for union with the audience, and as a creator, with a work of art."

But during the creative process, Garfield reached an epiphany about the intangibility of such a synthesis. "There is no union," she says. "As soon as you touch it, it's gone. The idea of the divine, especially in the past decade in this country, has been co-opted so that God is almost a dirty word. And we make it okay by saying, 'We're talking about spiritual things, which is different.' I think that I want to yank back the idea of God from

popular denigration. This risks putting some people off because they might think this show is some kind of religious ceremony. It's not that—it's the intersection of art, life and death."

For Garfield, an English choreographer based in New York since 1986, that concept was most profoundly apparent in her own life by the encounter with the bear. "There was a momentary experience of God, of a wholeness, of completeness, of a need for nothing else," she says. "So in creating a dance around this idea of looking for that moment, let's face it: I'm bound to fail. This is a hard thing to pull off. Except that the funny thing is that here and there, we tap into it. It happens a little bit when I encounter Omagbitse's eyes or when Brandin's hand touches my skin or when Jonathan's light moves past us like a breeze. It really is about creating the dance in the moment."



Garfield, foreground, lifts a knee in *Limerence*. Photograph: Cyrus Ra

As she sees it, just as the choreography is a vehicle for performance, the performance becomes a vehicle for a form of prayer. "And I interpret prayer," she notes, "as this moment when nothing is lacking." She laughs. "It's all science and God now. What is matter? The closer you look at it, the more it dissolves. Dance is always in flux, it's always moving and yet so often as a choreographer, you're trying to land something."

During the past year, she realizes that she's given up that kind of ambition—to create a perfect dance and set it in stone. Now, she's focused on relinquishing control, an approach that is not without risk. "With this ad hoc trilogy, I have to figure out if I can enter into the pieces and steer the course," she says. "Will I have the map or not? I don't know. Dance should fail miserably or succeed impossibly, and I've been there. I think that this is a pretty optimistic show for me. It's kind of hopeful and kind of happy. What can I tell you? I came out of the cave and everything's fine."