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KEELY GARFIELD: HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT RELATIONSHIPS VIEWED THROUGH A CRACKED GLASS

by Deborah Jowitz

When enigmas are falling like light snow, it's best to sit back and savor them unworriedly. I repeat the title of Keely Garfield's new *Limerence* to myself, and my tongue feels slippery; if I alter the pronunciation, I think of bird lime and how emotions can trap you the way that substance makes birds' feet stick to the branches they alight on. Both birds and fishes are mentioned in the mysterious 10-line poem printed in the program. Perhaps that's as far as I should go with these ideas. Garfield's works often pull you into perverse and ironic visions of subjects you thought you knew by heart.

The West End Theater, where the resident dance company, David Parker and The Bang Group, curates its "Soaking Wet" evenings is itself a multi-layered arena. The former chapel, with its vaulting ceiling, has more air space than floor space. The performing area, shaped like half a big pie, brings the action very close to the several tiers of pews that make up the seating. For *Limerence*, the ingenious lighting designer Jonathan Belcher has housed spotlights in wooden crates. He had also brought in two "soft lights"—bathtub-sized lamps that hang, swinging, from wheelable metal frameworks. When rotated by Belcher and dancer Brandin Steffensen, these shine now on Garfield and Omagbitse Omagbemi, now in our eyes, as we peer into the shadows where the two women tangle gently against the back wall.

They're a compelling pair. Initially Garfield wears black tights, a glittering black-and-white striped shift, and a pink sweater. Omagbene is costumed in deep pink trousers, a blue-green dress, and a sparkling black jacket with a white shirt's collar and open cuffs attached. When Belcher starts vivid kaleidoscopic patterns turning the walls into jungles of color, or stained glass windows gone made, the dancers glint dangerously. Garfield, a white woman, looks weary and drained of color. Omagbemi, a woman of color, radiates confidence even when apparently puzzled. She's easier, warmer, and slightly more fluid; executing the same movements, Garfield makes you feel effort and determination. Which may be the point.

Sometimes they both seem to feel trapped—by this room and by each other's limbs. They also can be succoring. When Omagbemi has a fit of coughing, Garfield brings her a coat, which she tosses away. Garfield then skids on the coat and

falls, while Omabemi launches into a dance of hopping on one leg until she collapses, and Garfield, concerned, comes to hover over her. They make some kind of pledge; each spits on her hands and runs them down the other's body. In the most mesmerizing passage, they remove a layer of clothing and, side by side, advance slowly along a diagonal on their hands and knees, settling into a rhythm dictated by one of the several unidentified instrumental or vocal pieces of music coming from a hooked-up i-pod. They're beautiful to watch. Watching their backs ripple, I think of cats in slowed-down motion, but their sway is more like that of elephants on a long trek. They retrace their steps, a little faster, and then advance again.



Photo: Cyrus Ra. Omagbitse Omagbemi (left) and Keely Garfield in *Limerence*

Many of the images are perfectly legible, but baffling in terms of their significance: hands congeal into claws, Garfield lip-synchs a song and numbly brandishes pom-poms that look as if they're made of videotape. But the women's relationship isn't the only one on view. While Garfield is having her cheerless cheerleader moment, Steffensen mounts an exercise bike and starts pedaling so furiously that I imagine he could generate electric power if he had the proper hookup. Garfield is intrigued, but torn. Omagbemi makes it clear that she's not sticking around to watch this man mess with a woman she loves. A whiff

of soap opera sneaks in. This guy is not a comforter. He dons mini boxing gloves and drives her backward with little punches, ignoring her light slaps. He hunkers down and snarls. When she coughs, he throws a net over her. But as soon as he stands on his hands for a long time, she peers at him through the bike wheel like a lioness in heat sizing up the field. I want to yell, "Keely! Forget this hunk!!" She probably wouldn't listen. The last image is of her standing on the bike seat while he pedals away.

Despite the evidence, I resist interpreting *Limerence* simply as a triangle, or a woman's abandonment of one lover for another, more conventional one. The piece's byways and shadows and intriguing nuances call for deeper probing. "Can a fish love a bird?" asks Garfield's poem. Maybe.