



Dance

Comfort Zone

Anita Hill Revenged With Realness

By Elizabeth Zimmer December 21st, 1994

An all-female Senate panel frills a white male Anita Hill and a white female Clarence Thomas. The panel's women come in all sizes, shapes, colors, and sexes, a powerful gospel chorus whose harmonies bring the house down. A lounge singer croons, "He's Having My Baby" to a hugely pregnant guy in a business suit. Jane Comfort's *S/He* exploits gender and racial reversals, offering up the Hill-Thomas hearings, among other hot gender topics, in the radically altered context of a multiracial variety show. The timeliness of her subjects is underscored by the fact that two big-budget movies on similar themes, *Junior* and *Disclosure*, and a couple of books reexamining the Clarence Thomas confirmation, snuck into town just ahead of her local premiere.

Comfort is one of the most original choreographers in the downtown scene. *S/He*, which opens the 1995 Altogether Different Series at the Joyce Theater January 3, debuted in Pennsylvania in September. Its New York premiere was postponed so she could sign onto the Sondheim-Lapine musical *Passion*. As she worked in the relative affluence of Broadway, she simultaneously rehearsed her own company, buffing the Hill-Thomas material and issues from her own life into a canny political spectacle.

"The Anita Hill hearing was such an infuriating experience." I remember heading to Vermont on this little two-lane highway and telling my husband if he didn't turn off the radio I was going to drive off the road. And he said, 'Jane, it's very important.' I was so upset. I'm intrigued with the reverse harassment charges, which, with Michael Crichton's book, are here, in the country, right now."

Comfort went looking for raw material at the Museum of Television & Radio. "It was amazing how little they had. But I got to watch the hearings again. The Anita Hill thing kicked in for so many women. These men are up there abusing this woman and getting away with it. 'Are you a scorned woman, Miss Hill? Do you have sexual fantasies about your coworkers? Are you in touch with reality on a daily basis?' No one is going to ask a man that. We turn that testimony around."

"I knew that I wanted my panel to be African-American, and the people I liked were all singers. I had to distill the testimony for singing – there's a lot of call-and-response stuff." What Nancy Alfaró, as Clarence Thomas, and Joseph Ritsch, as Anita Hill, say in *S/He* is pretty much straight testimony, but transformation of self electrify Comfort's version of the proceedings.

Comfort is a master collaborator. Andre Shoals, a young dancer and drag artist in *S/He*, suggested some transformations of the text; she was happy to adopt them. “He said we should ask Joseph all this really ridiculous ‘white’ stuff, like ‘Do you have any Donny and Marie Osmond albums, Mr. Hill? Do you eat Velveeta Cheese? Did you ever receive an L.L. Bean catalogue?’ In Anita Hill’s case, would all those details have been aired publicly if the protagonists had been white? That’s a subtext coming to the surface.” She also owes a lot to Alfaro who’s been with her for nine years and has played shy, repressed female characters. “In *S/He*, she’s doing the exact opposite, in spades,” says Comfort, who has cast her as the oppressor in several different guises, including that of a manipulative woman.

Striding around a rehearsal studio in black tights and boots and a short black skirt, her hair alive with light, Comfort resembles a fashion editor or the manager of a chic boutique. But she’s a trickster. A photo of her in her Jack Daniel’s character – “this weeny little guy, a Charlie Manson wannabe from the trailer park” – adorns the December page in the 1994 Drag King Calendar. In drag on video, she’s managed to fool even her own company.

Comfort got involved in drag because it was a preoccupation with her dancers, and because it’s an intrinsic part of the environment of the city. “When my 11-year-old niece came for a visit, I drove her all around. We went down Ninth Avenue, and she saw these transvestites on the street. And she was transfixed and horrified, but that’s what she remembers about New York more than anything.”

While developing her 1991 *Department*, which explored bigotry and the dislocations felt by a young Southern girl (played by Alfaro) seeking a career as a singer in New York, she met Shoals, whose drag name is Afrodite. Shoals lured Mark Dendy, a former member of Comfort’s ensemble, into drag work. “Mark evolved an identity as Sandy Sheets, a female televangelist in recovery. And my intern was involved with drag. I was surrounded by it, going to their shows. I wanted to deal with reverse gender, but not from a gay viewpoint – that work’s being done all the time. More as a feminist social commentary.”

In January 1993, Comfort took Diane Torr’s drag-king workshop, a regular offering whose graduates reverberate throughout the Downtown community. (Torr’s own company brings *Drag Kings and Subjects* to P.S. 122 in February). Comfort came to Torr’s workshop with an identity in mind and a costume. “A female-to-male transvestite made us up as men. Then we spent seven hours working with Diane on how men sit, and their use of space – huge! Diane was fascinating, the way she would pick up a grape, doing it just the way a guy would, or hold up a glass.”

One night, as Jack Daniels, Comfort escorted Shoals as Afrodite to a club, USA, where Shoals was performing. “I was really nervous, because I don’t have a voice. With Diane, I was in a big group, but at USA I was going to have to take a taxi home alone at night – a reason I took a Southern character is because so many Southern men have high voices. I was scared to get in a cab and use my voice. But I went with Afrodite and these guys, and we got in the VIP elevator. There was a woman running it whom I’ve seen in ballet class. And she surveys us all and goes by me just like that. I realized she didn’t know who I was. I went, ‘Damn!’ And the whole night I passed!”

She stands up, swaggers to the side of the room, and folds her arms. “I spent the night leaning up against the wall. Afrodite brought me drinks so I didn’t have to order. Nobody approached me the entire time. You know, you could never do this as a woman. And I’m watching all these guys leaning up against the wall, just like this. Moving nothing. And of

course the drag queens are dancing all over the place, moving their bodies. It's fascinating. There's still a core male me that I'm trying to get to know."

"In on section of *S/He*, we go through male/female sitting behavior. And then we get out of our chairs and take standing gender poses, forms of boxing and flamenco port de bras. I find it utterly fascinating, trying to be a guy around Andre, who's this gorgeous, six-foot-tall black woman. I've had a very hard time – he's so perfect as a woman, he's beautiful, he's not exaggerated. And he's really tried to help me. He's constantly taking movement away from me, because men don't move very much. So the music is playing and I'm like, doing my leg, and he says, don't move your leg."

Comfort's life has evolved since her Tennessee childhood. She's the wife of a banker, lives in an airy, dramatically proportioned TriBeca loft with two kids (Clair, nine, and Gardiner, 14), and visits topless bars in male drag in order to fully understand the difference between male and female use of space. She lunges around her studio, spreading her legs wide to show how men fill a room, applying her "drag king" experience.

"If confronted, a male would never drop his gaze. Women – especially if you're from the South, you drop your gaze, you nod your head, you agree, you're always going, 'uh-huh, uh-huh.'" Comfort demonstrates, perhaps unconsciously, one hand clutched between her knees."

"I'm a Southern girl. The girl stuff is even more exaggerated if you're raised in the South. I mean, dropping the gaze is such a Southern thing, some kind of deference to power. Men never do it. And boys learn early on."

Twenty years ago, studying painting at UNC-Chapel Hill, Comfort saw Merce Cunningham's company and decided she'd rather perform. Trained in both visual arts and dance, she's been choreographing since 1978, choosing themes that consistently place her ahead of the curve. Last year's tour de force, *Faith Healing*, embroiders the text of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Its winning and original aspect was largely her over-the-top choreography of the psychic subtext she created for Williams' characters, evoking a visual, physical manifestation of the text. Her work, which included the Gentleman Caller on roller skates giving Alfaro's Laura the ride of her life, so impressed a Lincoln Center staffer that he urged James Lapine to offer the post of associate director on *Passion*.

Comfort is the first Downtown artist in some years- and one of very few young mothers – to wind up on the creative team for a Broadway musical. There are similarities between the Italian story she helped Sondheim bring to the stage and the Tennessee Williams script she plumbed last year: both feature suppressed, smoldering women. *Passion's* Fosca, a character not unlike *Menagerie's* Laura, also has a gentleman caller. Comfort remember the *Passion* experience for what it taught her about doing creative work in the highly scheduled, unionized environment of Broadway theater, where there's no time for unprofessional behavior. "Five-minute breaks were monitored with a stopwatch. When you're working with actors and want to set something in a last run-through...the clock stops exactly at six."

Comfort has learned a great deal about the comparative economics of Downtown versus mainstream theater. She recently received a \$20,000 two-year NEA grant. Her company's annual budget, still in five figures, is about a third as big as those of other choreographers in her range.

“A lot of people have said, ‘How fabulous, now you can move into commercial theater and make a lot of money. And I’d love to work on Broadway again, because my experience with James and Steve was so great. But I have no intention of shifting careers. I love my company and I love what I do. I just hope there will be enough money to keep on doing it.”

Comfort’s husband is, like her, a Southerner, from High Point, North Carolina. “It’s just hard, you know, with two children and both of our careers. John travels a lot to Latin America. But I rehearse at home. My kids are learning firsthand that women run things. I want them to come see the performances, to see the whole process. They’ll see why Mom’s so tired. Why Mom has to take a nap every day at about 5:30 before they get their dinner. They see the rehearsal, the costumes all over the house; they know the dancers, they have a relationship with them. They see me on the phone and on the computer, late at night, working on the business side of it. See me getting crazy as the show comes up closer. They saw *Faith Healing*, and *Passion*, too. So they understand why Mom wasn’t home all this time. They can see the whole cycle.”

A Downtown choreographer may work with limited resources, but as director of her own company, Comfort makes the plans and sets the schedules. As associate director on a Broadway show, however, she had to adapt to a schedule much more demanding than anything she’s ever faced. John had some trouble getting used to the reality of that situation.

“I told him what the rehearsal hours were. I said, ‘It’s almost like I’m going to be on tour. I’ll be home in the mornings, but then I won’t be there at night.’ And I don’t think he wanted to know. My husband is incredibly supportive and kind; he cooks, he’s totally involved with the children’s welfare...but he’s, he’s well, what can I say? He’s very traditional. He has this fantasy, like a lot of men have, that, even though he’s married to an artist – I mean, most traditional men aren’t married to artists – that even though I am physically active all day long, rehearsing, somehow when he comes home the kids are going to be fed, and I’m going to be standing there at the stove with the bubbling soup, in a good mood.

“That’s another thing I put into *S/He* – the man rushes in with his briefcase and the kids jump all over him. And he has to deal with the baby-sitter problem, and the childcare, you know, all that stuff. And then the woman walks in and says, ‘Hi honey, what’s for dinner?’”

The Altogether Different audiences at the Joyce will find a dance theater piece that stretches the medium, that is at once politically astute and very funny, that casts Anita Hill’s inquisitors as a bunch of high-heeled, many-hued bitches with attitude. The conviction behind that attitude has been, for the choreographer, hard won, and developed in some very strange places.

“The hardest part of Diane’s workshop was our night at Billy’s Topless – some woman locked eyes with me, because we were giving them dollars, and she started gyrating for me and spreading her legs and looking me right in the eye. I wanted to drop my gaze and run screaming out of that bar. It was so difficult. I said to myself, you will not drop your gaze, you will look at her like a male, you are going to run your eyes up and down her body as if you own it, and you are going to maintain eye contact as if you own her. And I was dying, it was so painful. I thought, boy, *that* is acting. It’s like the way I’m dealing with my performers. I have all this authority, and there’s a part of me going, Arghhhhh!”