

## REVIEW

# INTRINSIC ROMANCE



*“4Chambers” dancers. Photo credit: wowe.  
Image courtesy of Jody Oberfelder.*

By Ashley P. Taylor  
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The New England contradance is a family-friendly activity. Men and women of all ages pair up to form long lines “up and down the [grange] hall.” The band puts bow to string, and the dance begins, a repeating sequence of do-si-dos, figure eights, and, of course, swings. The lady and her partner (or whoever plays those roles—same-sex couples are common) hold each other by the shoulders on one side, and on the other, hold out clasped hands like the spoke of a wheel. They spin, pivoting around on the ball of one foot, pulling apart like samples in a centrifuge, staring into each other’s eyes, the only relatively still points in the whirling room. As the dance progresses, each dancer travels toward or away from the band, taking a new partner with each repetition of the sequence. Everybody dances with everyone; there’s nothing personal about it. And yet every once in a while, a young woman gets swung so fast, by someone tall and straight and solid, that she

feels effervescent, as if she is going to catch the breeze with her skirt; this fellow’s touch has momentarily transformed her world. The same woman occasionally wishes she didn’t have to dance with certain particularly sweaty or bossy or creepy partners, but she can’t avoid it, either; it’s part of the dance.

Contradances are a blend of romance and formality. These magnetic moments of attraction and repulsion exist as a milky cloudiness beneath the smooth surface of ritual. Similarly, submerged romance is stirred up by “4Chambers,” the interactive dance by Jody Oberfelder Projects at Arts@Renaissance in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on view this past February and March.

In the piece, audience participants interact with dancers while traveling through four rooms representing various aspects of the heart: physical, medical, emotional. “4Chambers” puts

you through your cardiac paces: the anticipation of the waiting room before the show begins; the acceleration of running; the startle response when a dancer slams into the wall beside you; the heat of skin against yours; a pulsing chest beneath your palm.

All I knew about the show going in was that I wasn't allowed to bring a notebook—or anything at all. In the “Waiting Room/Antechamber,” I felt unarmed. I knew that there would be a maximum of 12 audience participants, who would interact with the dancers somehow. I was the first person there. No phone, no clock, no other people. Would there be a cardiovascular test? Would I pass? Would I remember the important things about this room without my notebook? What were the important things?

Finally, Oberfelder and six other audience members filled the antechamber, and the lights went down. The choreographer stood, illuminated by a white cube-shaped lamp on the floor, and welcomed us to “4Chambers,” an exploration of the heart guided by “dancer docents.” She beckoned to me, put her hands on my shoulders. We breathed in and out. I tried to have good posture. Oberfelder sent me down a hallway, through a black curtain into a dark room. A dancer docent put his hands on my shoulders and placed a red pillow on the floor for me to sit on. The other audience members entered one by one. The ceiling lit up with video projections repeated in several blocks. Each block seemed to have its mirror image so that an up-and-down movement in one frame became a contraction of the whole display. White, tank-topped chests drew in on themselves. Were we going to dance? Where were the other performers?

Interactive performances crank up the sense of anticipation. I want to describe it by saying, “I didn't know what was going to happen,” but then, audience members don't know what's going to happen when they see a new show on the stage, either. The difference is that in an interactive piece, what happens affects the audience physically, and the audience is expected to react in the moment.

In the following, coral-colored chamber, the dancer docents, six of them, I believe, were waiting. A woman in blue jeans with pixie-cut blonde hair put her hands on my shoulder. We ran over to a wall. I imitated her, making a bridge with my body against the wall. She went under me, made a bridge; I went under her. Then she left me to watch. Everyone was dancing. One woman rolled over the back of her docent in what looked like contact improv. The docents brought us out into the center of the room and danced around us, jumping and stomping as if to startle us. We ran around the room in a circle. We breathed harder. A second door led out of the room.

The following two rooms, called not chambers but “arteries,” were calmer. In the “Aural Artery,” the guides placed our fingers on tiny green lights, which produced a cacophony of digital beeping noises. These were monitors that measure heart rate



*“4Chambers” performance. Photo credit: Julie Lemberger.  
Image courtesy of Jody Oberfelder.*

according to the way light is absorbed or reflected by the finger flesh. Next, a dancer docent led us into a bathroom with several different stations for learning about the heart from a scientific standpoint—blood flow through the heart, the story of a heart attack, the heart-brain relationship explained by neuroscientists, and a smartphone app that measures heart rate, and other features of cardiac health, by scanning your face with the phone’s camera. It started to seem as if there was no part of the body where the heart’s influence couldn’t be detected. These stations were very creatively designed, yet this chamber was less engaging than the others because it was devoid of anticipation. It seemed clear that we would stay in that room silently watching videos or taking our pulses until the time was up. I didn’t wonder if someone might grab me and ask me to dance.

From the “Artery of Knowledge,” we filed into a group shower and sat down in a row of chairs opposite individual video monitors. A man’s face appeared larger than life on a screen below the shower faucets: an interrogator. The interrogator-psychologist asked the big questions, and when he addressed an individual, that person’s picture appeared next to his. How much of your time are you doing what you want to do? When do you feel most alive? Is the heart a good metaphor for love?

“4Chambers” addressed many aspects of the heart. The one that was underemphasized was romance. The only hint of it was the fact that we interacted physically with our dancer docents. We felt their pulses. The connection was not sexual, but it was physical.

During the interrogation, I piped up to assert that love exists not in the heart but in the brain. I later questioned my answer. During sexual intercourse, the heart rate quickens. The sexual organs become engorged with blood. Both the central and autonomic nervous systems are involved, but everyone knows that arousal can happen without—and in spite of—control by the brain. Recalling the pulsing bodies in the first video—in and out, push and pull, contract and release—the throbbing of the heart formed an analogy to another kind of pulsing there just beneath the skin.

The fourth chamber had red, corrugated walls. There, we felt our pulses: wrist, neck, ankle, knee, groin. The docents danced vigorously, jumping up against the walls between us. People smiled nervously after each startling moment. The docents formed a pulsing mass in the center of the room. When my dancer docent returned to me, she placed my right hand on her chest, as she had done several times throughout the evening. Her pulse was fast. She stared into my eyes, her mouth slightly open in a friendly position, nearly a smile. To touch someone in this state of uncontrollable excitation, this state of exposure, felt very intimate. It was also just part of the structure of the performance.