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Finding ‘Ghost Collaborators’ for an All-American Ballet

Matthew Lutz-Kinoy’s “Filling Station” has new choreography and music but converses with the 1938 original and its “glimmer of queer liberation.”

By Brian Seibert
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The choreographer Niall Jones, left, and the artist Matthew Lutz-Kinoy have collaborated on a new version of “Filling Station,” a 1938 ballet staged by Lincoln Kirstein’s short-lived Ballet Caravan. Credit: George Etheredge for The New York Times

In American dance history, the 1938 ballet “Filling Station” is something between a milestone and a footnote. Made for American dancers by an American choreographer with a score by an American composer — a rare combination then — it was also novel in theme, about the interactions of local characters at a gas station. It was a pioneering work, and a popular one, that has become an infrequently revived curio.

The multidisciplinary artist Matthew Lutz-Kinoy discovered “Filling Station” through a fragment of it: Paul

Cadmus's original costume design for Mac, the station attendant, as recreated in the artist Nick Mauss's 2018 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. That costume looks like the coveralls that a 1930s filling station attendant might have worn, except that it's see-through.

"It was a glimmer of queer liberation," Lutz-Kinoy said recently. "To see this historical representation of queer expression bursting out of a rigid structure like narrative ballet was very moving."

That glimmer led Lutz-Kinoy to create his own version of "Filling Station." Commissioned by the avant-garde art center the Kitchen, it will have its debut on Thursday — at an actual filling station: the Mobil station on Eighth Avenue and Horatio Street in the West Village.

Lutz-Kinoy has retained some of the characters — Mac and the truck drivers Ray and Roy — but has altered and updated the scenario. Instead of Virgil Thomson's score, there's a new one by the experimental musician James Ferraro. The fashion designers Mike Eckhaus and Zoe Latta provide their own take on the costumes. And in place of the original choreography by Lew Christensen, who went on to direct San Francisco Ballet for decades, there is new work by Niall Jones and Raymond Pinto.

Despite all the changes, the original "Filling Station" is a strong presence in Lutz-Kinoy's reimagining. "Queer representation is constantly fighting for a space of expression," he said. "There's a constant push to conform." So discovering a precedent like "Filling Station" was, he said, "like finding your ghost collaborators."



From left, Kris Lee, Maxfield Haynes, Mina Nishimura, Niala and Bria Bacon in "Filling Station." The cast has a range of dance backgrounds. Credit: Rob Kulisek

The project is as much an art-historical study as a performance. An exhibition at the Kitchen's temporary space at Westbeth in the West Village (through Nov. 3) intermingles archival materials from across the history of "Filling Station" with photos and videos from the rehearsal process for this version, along with paintings by Lutz-Kinoy that borrow imagery from various "Filling Station" productions. An additional performance at Dia Beacon on Sept. 23 will feature a 50-foot backdrop that collages these paintings.

"There's a deliberate shuffling of time," said Lutz-Kinoy, who added that he sees both the rehearsal process and the performance as a kind of live-action role playing. "We're taking cues from the historical structures but we're creating and uncreating those architectures," he said.

The original “Filling Station” was created for Ballet Caravan, a short-lived touring company led by the impresario Lincoln Kirstein, as part of his long effort to establish ballet in the United States. It was a mix of ballet bravura, vaudeville gags and comic-strip aesthetics. (A 1954 television performance by dancers from New York City Ballet, which Kirstein founded with George Balanchine in 1948, can be found on YouTube.)

Kirstein described the gas station setting as an invitingly familiar one, a crossroads where different kinds of “recognizable social types” could meet. Lutz-Kinoy’s project follows Mauss’s exhibition and the 2019 show “Lincoln Kirstein’s Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art in reclaiming Kirstein and his circle of friends, lovers and collaborators as trailblazers of queer aesthetics.

In his version, Lutz-Kinoy has swapped the motorist, wife and child for a tourist, and he’s replaced the gangster, which he called “an outdated archetype,” with an activist. “With all the elements and collaborations,” he said, “I was trying to open doors, not close them.”

Jones said that, in choreographing the new version, he didn’t feel bound to the original, to the new score or even to the idea of narrative, except as a “fiction or friction that we find ways to turn up or down.” He was attentive instead, he said, to “what else entered the room and entered the history” by way of the diverse cast, several of them queer or trans, and its range of dance backgrounds — from ballet (Maxfield Haynes) to ballroom vogueing (Niala) to Butoh and experimental dance (Mina Nishimura).

“There was a lot of difference in the space, and I was working not to collapse us into the same hole,” Jones said.



From left, Niala, Bacon, Nishimura, Haynes and Lee. “There was a lot of difference in the space,” Jones said, “and I was working not to collapse us into the same hole.” Credit: Rob Kulisek

Performing the work at the gas station also changes it. Legacy Russell, the Kitchen's executive director and chief curator, stressed that the station is a local, family-owned business and community site.

"What does it mean to take 'Filling Station' out of the theater space and have it operate more within the blurry boundaries of reality?" she asked.

Jones noted how "there's already dancing happening" at the station: "the cyclists and the delivery drivers and the buses, all of this movement and all these negotiations in this tiny little nexus."

A dance performed at a gas station is also inevitably colored by the recent death of O'Shae Sibley, who was vogueing to a Beyoncé song with friends at a gas station in Midwood when he was taunted with homophobic slurs and fatally stabbed.

While acknowledging what Lutz-Kinoy called "a tragic correlation" between the death and the long-developing "Filling Station" project, Jones said that the creative team was being careful that the project not "become a parasite" on Sibley's death.

Still, Jones said: "These events horrifically don't happen that infrequently. We're dealing with queer, Black and trans death and mourning constantly, and this project doesn't exist outside of those realities."

Jones said he and the rest of the creative team had been thinking about freedom. "It's both utterly beautiful and utterly horrible to know that in that moment, when Sibley and his friends were dancing to Beyoncé, they felt good," he said. "They were in that freedom. And it had to be assaulted."

Jones and his "Filling Station" collaborators are "working in the wake of that," he said. Their project is "in the world and it's going to resonate with these moments of joy and horror."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/13/arts/dance/filling-station-matthew-lutz-kinoy.html>