Xavier Cha
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Xavier Cha, ***Buffer*,** **2017.** Performance view, Brooklyn Academy of Music, November 1, 2017. Cassandra Freeman and Babs Olusanmokun. Photo: Rebecca Smeyne.

Xavier Cha is a New York–based artist. Her latest work, Buffer*, 2017, was made during her Harkness Foundation for Dance residency at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) this year, as part of Performa 17. The piece is on view at BAM through Saturday, November 4, 2017.*

IN A STRUCTURAL SENSE, *Buffer* is an analog representation of consuming digital media, but it doesn't have to be that specific. That's just the surface structure of how it's built. It alternates between three channels, or switches between tabs on a viewing device, and some of the scenes buffer or pause or loop or freeze. Then it alternates between the different scenes.

When I got asked to do this piece, I immediately thought about the proscenium format. Because usually in my pieces people can just enter and leave as they please, the work is often non-narrative. So, I thought about the experience of sitting and viewing a work for an hour and how that's pretty unusual now. When do people do that? Usually it's when they're in front of a screen. So, I really wanted to superimpose and conflate those moments of viewing into one—the attention spans that we have for viewing privately and publicly, and the thresholds that we have for certain things.

The title made sense to me because it refers to the literal buffer that happens when you're viewing things online and they freeze. You have the patience for it, for some reason, at home—I guess because you can go and do something else, like check your phone. I began thinking about how that would feel in a public

viewing experience. But then *buffer*, to me, also implies this weird alien space between humans. I think of it like this puffy sac between us, like we're negotiating these weird buffers between humanity.

There's a very lonely theme that runs through the piece. Even when you're really intimate with someone, in the scripted conversations and the dance, there's still this alienation that you feel, this loneliness. You're trying to make connections, but somehow they are just barely missed, even when they are right in front of you. That is just addressing what it is to be human. What are real, authentic feelings, anyway, when capitalism and all these other things manipulate everything? Even the idea of following a single narrative thread doesn't really exist anymore; everything is so fractured. It's hard to identify what is actually you.

I wanted to include this almost banal conversation between a couple. Well, not banal, but when the woman's sharing her dreams—that's the kind of thing that doesn't usually translate. When you tell someone about a dream it never really matches up to what you experienced. So that kind of conversation usually only happens with someone you feel really intimate with. Otherwise it just sounds dumb or flat. So, there's this conversation that really pulls the viewer into a private world. And there's always a sense of searching that the performer has. And they never physically touch, but you do feel this intimacy between them; that's the kind of energy I wanted to create there. And then the dance-opera scene, to me, is like the subconscious dream world. There's a detached feeling in the dances that's almost heart-wrenching. The love scene is supposed to be a relief, to make you feel like these people are truly connected and sharing their love. It's supposed to be a transcendent, beautiful moment that gives you a relief from viewing, like, "Ah! I'm not trying to unpack this other stuff." That's a reason for that channel, and then you get to switch back between the three.

It was all kind of conceived simultaneously. I knew I wanted to choreograph, and I knew I wanted there to be channels that it switches between—it just felt pretty clear what they were going to be from the start. I wanted a movement scene. I wanted a private conversation. I guess it was fulfilling a desire I had of wanting to delve into the process of writing the script. I was really excited about doing that, and I knew I wanted to choreograph movement with opera, so I guess I decided on things I wanted to work with. I built those into Buffer pretty immediately.

I don't know that I would say that this alienation is a technological problem—that I'm anti-internet or that we're all losing touch. That's not the conversation I'm trying to have. I wanted this work to come from a sincere, vulnerable, and emotional place, and that's definitely an emerging necessity with creative voices. Irony doesn't have a place now.

— As told to Grant Johnson