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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

A Body of Velvet, a Gesture of Defiance

Trajal Harrell's The Köln Concert, 24.08.2026 [ENA]

Trajal Harrell's The Köln Concert is a work of extraordinary poise: a dance of solitude that nevertheless makes a community visible. Created with the Schauspielhaus Zürich Dance Ensemble, Harrell's choreography takes Keith Jarrett's legendary 1975 piano improvisation not as a musical score to be illustrated, but as a living terrain—unstable, melancholic, ecstatic and constantly becoming.

In its roughly 50-minute duration, the work proposes a profound meditation on how bodies hold memory, style, grief and desire. It is modern dance in the fullest sense: neither obedient to a single tradition nor interested in formal purity, but open to collision, vulnerability and the politics of appearance.

Before Jarrett's celebrated piano begins, Harrell opens the evening with music by Joni Mitchell. This introductory gesture is crucial. It establishes an atmosphere of intimate exposure, as if the audience were permitted to enter a private room of recollection before the larger choreography arrives.

The stage is sparse: seven piano stools, placed at measured distances, punctuate the empty space. They look like markers of absence—individual islands in a landscape where closeness must be negotiated rather than assumed. The dancers enter one by one, wrapped in textures of fur, velvet and fringe. Their costumes do not simply decorate the movement; they create a tactile world in which the body is at once armoured, ceremonial and fragile.

What follows is not a narrative in the conventional theatrical sense. It is rather a sequence of presences. Each performer appears to inhabit an autonomous universe, carrying a distinct rhythm, gaze and temperature. Yet the work never becomes merely a gallery of solos. Harrell's choreography turns individuality into a shared condition. The dancers seem to be together not because they form a harmonious group, but because each understands the others' distance, loneliness and need for recognition.

This is where Harrell's long engagement with voguing and ballroom culture becomes essential. Voguing is present in the work not as a quotation or an easily identifiable stylistic sign, but as an ethical and aesthetic foundation. Its articulation of pose, line, face, hand and gaze gives every dancer a heightened awareness of being seen. A hand may unfold with the precision of a fan; a shoulder may tilt imperceptibly; a turn of the head can become an entire emotional statement. The dancers do not merely move through space. They compose themselves within it, producing images that are proud, wounded, seductive and strangely sacred.

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The choreography's references to classical antiquity are equally important. At moments, the performers seem to resemble the elongated female figures of Alberto Giacometti: thin, upright, weathered by time, but refusing collapse. Giacometti's sculptures are never simply portraits of isolation. They are beings carved out of distance, standing in the world with an almost impossible intensity. Harrell's dancers carry a similar paradox. They are at once monumental and precarious. Their bodies seem reduced to essentials—spine, feet, neck, arm, gaze—yet each small adjustment expands outward until it feels architectural.

Like Giacometti's goddesses, they do not occupy space casually. They consecrate it. Their verticality is not heroic in the traditional modernist sense; it is fragile, hard-won and therefore more moving. A dancer standing almost still in black, balanced on the edge of the foot, can appear both regal and abandoned. The stage becomes populated by contemporary divinities: not untouchable figures of perfection, but goddesses who have known exhaustion, loss, sensuality and struggle. Harrell finds grandeur not in power over others, but in the determination to remain visible.

This vision also creates a fascinating resonance with Madonna's 1990 video for "Vogue." Madonna's video famously filtered ballroom-derived movement through the stylised glamour of Hollywood photography, fashion editorial imagery and Art Deco fantasy. Its hands frame faces; its bodies strike sculptural poses; its black-and-white surfaces transform dance into a sequence of iconic photographs. Harrell's work shares that devotion to pose and visual composition, but it complicates the polished certainty of Madonna's pop image.

Where "Vogue" turns the body into a brilliant, instantly legible icon, The Köln Concert allows the icon to tremble. Harrell's performers may evoke fashion photography, film stars or ballroom royalty, yet their beauty is never smooth or fully controlled. Their poses carry hesitation. Their glamour is crossed by fatigue. Their gestures emerge not from the desire to conquer the camera, but from the need to remain present in a world that can make bodies feel disposable or unseen.

The comparison is not superficial. Both Madonna's "Vogue" and Harrell's choreography understand that posing can be a form of survival. To strike a pose is to say: I am here; I decide how I will be seen. But Harrell returns this idea to a more vulnerable terrain. His dancers reveal the emotional labour behind the image—the waiting, the uncertainty, the recovery after a gesture has been offered to the world. In doing so, he restores depth to the glamorous surface.

Keith Jarrett's improvisation intensifies this effect. The piano does not dictate a fixed emotional sequence; it wanders, circles, pauses and erupts. Harrell responds by allowing movement to breathe. The dancers sometimes appear to float above the music, then suddenly sink into it as if it were water. The relationship between sound and body is not illustrative but reciprocal: Jarrett's repetitions become spaces for hesitation; his surges become invitations to risk; his lyricism exposes the dancers' inward lives.

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The Köln Concert is ultimately a work about the dignity of complexity. It refuses the false choice between high art and popular culture, between ancient sculpture and contemporary ballroom, between the formal abstraction of modern dance and the emotional immediacy of a pop image. Harrell brings these worlds together without flattening them. The result is a choreography of rare intelligence and sensuality: a constellation of solitary figures who, through their attention to one another, become a fragile but radiant collective.

In Harrell's hands, dance is not simply movement. It is an act of remembering, styling, mourning and insisting. Like Giacometti's figures, the dancers stand against the void. Like the bodies in Madonna's "Vogue," they understand the transformative force of the pose. Yet Harrell's achievement is to make those poses breathe—to show us the human vulnerability inside the icon, and the quiet majesty inside every body that refuses to disappear.

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