

Out There's 'Jack &' considers a life after prison

Friday, January 18, 2019 by Jay Gabler in
Arts & Leisure



Image courtesy Walker Art Center

America's incarceration obsession is a problem of vast scope, with complex and often tragic consequences.

OUT THERE 2019: TRANSNATIONAL/TRANSDISCIPLINARY

([HTTP://WWW.CITYPAGES.COM/CALENDAR/OUT-THERE-2019-TRANSNATIONALTRANSDISCIPLINARY/499390421](http://www.citypages.com/calendar/out-there-2019-transnationaltransdisciplinary/499390421))

Walker Art Center
\$25-\$30

In

JACK &

, theater artist Kaneza Schaal and her collaborators approach the problem by spotlighting one aspect, gently but provocatively turning it around and around to examine.

Their subject is the adjustment from prison to a life beyond walls. Released prisoners face severe discrimination, both official and unofficial, but that's not Schaal's primary focus here. Rather, in collaboration with performer Cornell Alston and writer/designer Christopher Myers, she seeks to demonstrate how prison can warp one's perspective, leaving the released prisoner with a sense of being a fish out of water in his own home.

That metaphor is central to

JACK &

, a Walker commission being presented this weekend as part of the annual Out There series. At the piece's opening, Alston walks onstage without ceremony. A goldfish in a bowl awaits him, along with two cans of orange Crush.

Eventually, audience members will notice that there's a subtle difference between the cans: one is of current design, and one appears decades old. During his years in custody, explains Alston as he takes a swig from the newer vessel, cans have "gone from pop-top to...whatever this is."

The piece, which also involves performers Rucy Frison, Modesto Flako Jimenez, and Stacey Karen Robinson, unfolds in three sections. The first is a monologue by Alston, who has served a 33-year sentence in the New York prison system. Referencing the goldfish, he asks the audience to imagine the smartest goldfish in the world ... but one who can never leave its bowl. What would that be like?

The monologue also includes the story of how the death of Osama Bin Laden led inmates of Alston's acquaintance to have ridiculous arguments about parachuting Navy dogs. The prisoners' purview, the anecdote suggests, was so constrained that even a moment of tremendous global significance was reduced to absurdity.

It's a thought-provoking and amusing monologue, and it could have easily filled the entire show ... but Schaal and her collaborators have other plans.

JACK &

becomes a domestic sitcom, with Alston struggling to bake a pineapple cake for his partner (Robinson). With help from his friend (Jimenez) that's really not much help at all, Alston bungles ingredients and makes a huge mess.

The cake is another metaphor, and Alston helpfully suggests several possibilities for what that might be. Basically, it could be any ordinary task that's challenging enough even if you don't go three decades without having experience at it. The sketch directly references classic sitcoms like

The Honeymooners

, but it leaves the impression that experiencing life after prison can be more like a bleaker version of

Seinfeld

. Life is harder than it has to be, and sometimes you laugh to keep from crying.

The piece concludes with an elegant dance interlude, Alston and Robinson captured from above on video displayed next to a projection of the goldfish in its bowl. (Rucyl Frison stands at a stage-right sound rig creating a warm, dynamic musical ambience.) This "Cotillion" section references a range of pageants and ceremonies from African-American history; it's a poignant way to end

JACK &

, suggesting a rite of passage that's both welcome and fraught.

All the while, that cake bakes in the oven. Eventually it starts to smoke ... and smoke, and smoke. Alston just keeps dancing, twirling through the turmoil with resolute grace.