



Canada's Dance Magazine

## NGS ("Native Girl Syndrome")

Lara Kramer DanceBy [Philip Szporer](#)



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Karina Iraola in Lara Kramer's NGS ("Native Girl Syndrome") / Photo by Lara Kramer

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You can never accuse Lara Kramer of taking the easy way out. In her latest piece, *NGS* ("Native Girl Syndrome"), topics of racism, intoxication and substance abuse among native women in Canada are front and centre in her narrative.

In the work's shattering opening scene, two characters are seen hovering over two baby carriages piled with garbage bags stuffed with odds and ends picked up on the streets. The women are shaky on their legs. Their motions seem slowed down, their bodies in a state of either dysfunction or disrepair. It's not too much of a stretch to imagine that they are inebriated, and possibly infected with AIDS or suffering from various other degradations to their bodies and their souls. Normally, it would be hard to focus on the performers in the expansive space of the Tangente stage, but Kramer's two dancers, Karina Iraola and Angie Cheng, are scarily skilled in their characterizations. One pops gum, the other sucks on a lollipop: both are terrific, exposing the trauma, anxiety and crisis that we can easily imagine fill these women's lives.

The emotional hangover these tremendously talented dancers carry is unmistakable and unforgettable. Every action seems an effort, whether it's Iraola with her mouth slack, opening a beer can and taking a swig, or Cheng stumbling across the stage, smearing mascara and makeup over her face and body. Despite her hollow-eyed portrayal always being on the verge of being out

of control, Cheng commands the stage. And Iraola operates with a fleshy realness that, even in her somnambulistic state, can whip up a brief moment of sexual frenzy, expose barely contained rage or inhabit abject rejection and alienation. Sadly, there is only one fleeting moment of interaction between the two performers in the entire piece, and that is a major dramaturgical problem for the piece.

Kramer, an Ojibway-Cree dancer and choreographer and a graduate of Concordia University's contemporary dance program in Montréal, has chosen a slice-of-life scenario for her piece. But she's not demonizing anyone or thrusting guilt our way, she's just making points about the shameful realities in which First Nation women live. That alone is difficult to present and encapsulate on stage, and the seriousness of her approach is honourable, but it makes for difficult viewing and Kramer doesn't develop the possibilities of the women's situations further. In *Fragments*, her first evening-length work in 2009, Kramer explored themes of abuse, isolation, fear and power as it related to her mother's experiences in residential schools. *NGS* builds on that earlier work: it is ideological dancemaking, but it is not to be easily dismissed because it is political. The performers embody the harsh reality of the disempowered and traumatized. There's not a dose of happiness in the whole piece – well, almost none. At one point, Cheng tosses the contents of her carriage about the stage. One object cast aside is a hardcover *History of Canada*. Cheng even picks the book up and opens it, but Kramer chooses not to offer in this moment anything beyond a subtle nod at colonialism, and thus doesn't exploit the moment to its fullest. In Canada, we live in a politically charged environment when it comes to native issues and realities. Kramer is an important new voice in our larger dance community as a contemporary choreographer, but also because her work is steeped in aboriginal concerns. What she's expressing and sharing is the spirit and stories of her people, and giving audiences a chance to reflect and become sensitized to a different documentation of native people in conflict and crisis.

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