


FRONT & CENTER

■ NEW YORK CITY



As Real as a Rodeo

Performers in 600 Highwaymen's *THE RECORD* meet for the first time in performance.

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SOME ARTISTS START PROJECTS BASED ON A SHORT story, a novel or a newspaper clipping. But for Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, the artistic directors of Brooklyn-based theatre group 600 Highwaymen, their starting point was *liveness*. Their show *THE RECORD*, which bows Jan 8–19 at the Public Theater as part of the Under the Radar festival (see page 80), takes the notion of liveness to an extreme.

“There’s an open-air rodeo in a small town in Texas that Abby and I go to and think about theatre,” says Silverstone. “Before the bull comes out of chute, the crowd swells and it’s beautiful. Literally, people move forward on the edge of their seat, and then they’re sitting straight up with their eyes transfixed. They’re just a few steps away from holding hands, it seems. I’m addicted to that feeling, and I want to feel it every day.” Silverstone and Browde began to wonder if they could make that feeling of rodeo aliveness happen more and more in rehearsal and performance. “How can we wake up this encounter—both for ourselves and for an audience?” Silverstone asks.

THE RECORD, which premiered at the Invisible Dog Art Center in Brooklyn last year, features a cast of 35 performers who

receive specific physical instructions, but never actually rehearse together. Rehearsals unfold one-on-one between performer and the artistic directors over a six-week period of time. “It’s a huge math problem,” Silverstone admits with a laugh, “but incredibly satisfying.” Though Browde and Silverstone work with a number of the same actors for the showing this month, the duo has changed roles around to keep the idea of a first encounter pure. “We want to make sure we keep the show as alive as possible, night to night,” says Silverstone.

Browde likens the show to living portraiture. The experience is “about organizing physical bodies in space and how much drama is inherent in the simple, present body of a performer—in giving the audience permission to stare quietly and deeply at someone’s unadjusted face.” To that end, the choreography provides audiences permission to engage in voyeurism, “and at the same time, works to eliminate a boundary between the spectator and the performer.”

An original score by Brandon Wolcott accompanies the movement, but there is no text. Says Silverstone, “In a way, not having text means we can get closer to the heart of something.” —*Eliza Bent*