Illuminating Racial **Identities**

don't expect to hear that question while waiting around a theater lobby for a performance to begin, especially not from a veiled stranger. But

SIOBHAN BURKE

Keyon Gaskin established a certain intimacy early on in his 40-minute solo, "its not a thing," at Abrons Arts Center on Friday.

Cloaked in black with a scarf draped over his face, Mr. Gaskin approached individual guests, inquired about their fears ("When were you afraid to day?") and offered a kiss, planted in black lipstick.

In the sea of genre-crossing work at American Realness, the festival of contemporary per-formance that comes to the Lower East Side each January common threads emerge. (This year's edition packs 18 productions, plus discussions and parties, into 11 days.) Mr. Gaskin's was one of three (mostly) solo works on Friday that addressed related themes of racial identity and masculinity through drastically different means. I saw it after the vehemently mournful "#negrophobia," by the Nigerian-American artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, and before the Dominican-born Ligia Lewis's transporting "Sorrow Swag."

Mr. Gaskin provides little context for his work, with just a one-line bio in the program: "Keyon Gaskin prefers not to contextualize their performances with their credentials." Sure enough, you want to know more. Once the audience was seated in the playhouse, he arrived unveiled, puttering around the shadowy stage while comment ing on his "contentions" with live performance. These included dancing to music, audience par-ticipation and dealing directly with racism — all of which he confronted in "its not a thing." After giving us permission to

American Realness continues through Sunday. Most performances are at Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand Street, Manhattan; 866-811-4111, americanrealness.com



American Realness Jaamil Olawale Kosoko in "#negrophobia," a work at Abrons Arts Center that focused on dead black men, including his brother, and includes his own poetry.

leave, then inviting us to sit onstage, Mr. Gaskin passed around a bottle of whiskey. cranked up Lil Wayne's "She Will" and clambered up to a grate above the stage, recklessly traversing its narrow length while smoking a cigarette. Back on our level, he darted among us, stuffed dice in his mouth and spit them out. Instructing one viewer to read from a book by the black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, he removed his shorts (including American-flag briefs) and did a half-naked tap dance.

A variety of blunt commentaries.

Suddenly it was over. "Get your things and go," he said, "and please don't clap."

Though brimming with unresolved conflict, this piece seemed almost Minimalist in comparison with "#negrophobia," performed in the Underground Theater by Mr. Kosoko. (And, trailing him with an iPhone camera, a

masked voyeur in heels and a thong — Alabama Kentrell, who goes by IMMA/MESS.) Mr. Kosoko transformed the concrete space into a tumultuous shrine to dead black men, including his brother, to whom the show is dedicated. From an initial reading of his own poetry to a trembling finale of simulated foaming at the mouth, he offers little hope, giving grief and rage a chance to reign.

While Mr. Kosoko explores the black male body, Ms. Lewis, who lives in Berlin, presents a white

male body, that of the strapping performer Brian Getnick, a fighter figure in white sneakers, white socks and white basketball shorts. Against throaty waves of sound supplied live by George Lewis Jr. (Ms. Lewis's brother, known as Twin Shadow), Mr. Getnick embodies awkward shards of movement and text with chilling conviction, at times vanishing into thick blue-tinted fog. "Sorrow Swag" ends with a blaring reference to Samuel Beckett's dramatic monologue

Mr. Getnick's mouth and goldencased teeth as he wails into the darkness

One of Mr. Gaskin's contentions sticks with me: that he is "performing for mostly white audiences," which describes the Realness audience. The festival addresses this, too, with a talk next weekend led by the scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz, who proposes that "the discourse of race in contemporary performance falls apart when whites try to understand black performance." Everyone should go.

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The Pope's High Road to Having a Heart

"Not I," a spotlight illuminating

From First Arts Page

third millennium" — not just war and poverty and social exclusion, but also fatalism, hardheartedness and self-righteousness

The theme of mercy, it turns out, also provides Francis with a metaphor for articulating his broader aim of shaking up the Roman Catholic Church, which he laid out in detail in a voluminous document called "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel") that was issued in November 2013. That document

— a manifesto, really — advocated decentralizing power in the
church, condemned economic
injustice and called for focusing

on the needs of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Echoing the beliefs of St. Francis, whose name he took, it called for a church devoted to the poor, a church that returned to its roots and the original healing ministry of Jesus. It was critical of self-righteous bureaucrats who would glorify themselves rather than Christ, and deplored those "dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and devi-ation" from doctrine.

In "The Name of God Is Mercy," Francis speaks succinctly — and with refreshing forthrightness — about these same matters, chastising 'scholars of the law" who "live attached to the letter of the law but who neglect love; men who only know how to close doors and draw boundaries." Instead, he urges people to think of the church as "a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded." Often speaking here more as a pastor than as the vicar of Christ, he emphasizes moral sincerity

The Name of God Is Mercy By Pope Francis Translated from the Italian by

Oonagh Stransky

151 pages. Random House. \$26. over dogma, an understanding of

the complexities of the world and individual experience over rigid doctrine. As a scholar and savvy church politician, Francis grounds his arguments in theological precedent, including the words of earlier popes. His views on mercy draw upon — or are informed by — writings on the

A leader determined to hew toward tradition and shake up the church, too.

subject by Aquinas, Merton and more recent scholars, like Cardi-

nal Walter Kasper (the author of another book on mercy, who has proposed that the church create a "penitential path" to bring divorced Catholics back into ommunion with the church) Francis is also skilled at using biblical examples and parables (like the familiar story of the Prodigal Son) to illustrate his arguments.

On some matters, Francis is utterly direct. Of the poor, the homeless and those "immigrants who have survived the crossing and who land on our shores," he "we touch the flesh of

Christ in he who is outcast, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, unemployed, persecuted, in search of refuge."

On the controversial topics of

homosexuality and divorce, he proposes no doctrinal changes but, as he's done in earlier statements and interviews, urges that the church take a welcoming approach to all — embracing approach to all — embracing understanding, tolerance and compassion. Asked about homosexuality by Mr. Tornielli, he repeats his much-quoted remark "Who am I to judge," adding that "before all else comes the individual person, in his wholeness and dignity."

and dignity."

The pope is most critical of those eager to cast stones. Pride, hypocrisy and the urge to judge others in terms of "preconceived notions and ritual purity" are the targets of his ire. He has chastised church bureaucrats for their "theological narcissism," and he says in this book that "we must avoid the attitude of some-one who judges and condemns from the lofty heights of his own certainty, looking for the splinter in his brother's eye while remaining unaware of the beam in his own."

An avid reader (he has said that his favorite authors include Borges, Dostoyevsky and Gerard Manley Hopkins) and a fan of Italian neo-realist movies, the pope has an easy conversational style that moves effortlessly between folksy sayings and erudite allusions, between common-sense logic and impas sioned philosophical insights. He is given to memorable metaphors — like urging priests to go out in the world and be "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep." And here, he discusses how sin is "more than a stain" that can be removed by a trip to "the dry cleaner" — but a wound that "needs to be treated,

The ease with which the pope speaks to the concerns of ordi-nary people, as well as his humble lifestyle (living not in the Apostolic Palace, but in a modest Vatican guesthouse, and traveling in a tiny Fiat car), is rooted in a heartfelt sense of humility. "A priest needs to think of his own sins," he says in this book, "to listen with tenderness, to pray to the Lord for a heart as merciful as his, and not to cast the first stone because he, too, is a sinner who needs to be forgiven.'

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In his new book, Pope Francis is succinct and critical.