ONSTAGE “Why is Fauxnique making Judith Butler dance?”

Trying to head off any audience confusion, Fauxnique (Monique Jenkinson) has posed the question herself.

“Because we intend the conversation to be embodied,” she clarifies.

“I guess we’re queering the conversation?” asks Butler politely.

“I guess so,” affirms Fauxnique.
Thus a philosopher and a drag queen met on a dance floor recently and, without further ado, and while busting perfectly respectable moves amid the whirling dappled light from a disco ball, started to talk.

That scene opened two weekends’ worth of new work and conversation, and it can serve as a lightly comic yet enthralling distillation of the aim behind Hope Mohr’s Bridge Project: the Bay Area choreographer’s annual series of multidisciplinary performance, master classes and residencies that, as the mission statement has it, “approaches curating as a form of community organizing to facilitate cultural conversations that cross discipline, geography, and perspective.”

By sparking encounters like this one between the acclaimed San Francisco–based dancer, faux queen and performance maker and the world-renowned philosopher, activist and gender theory trailblazer—or, to take an example from the 2015 series, between Bay Area dancemakers and visiting luminaries like Deborah Hay or Jeanine Durning—the series has been a boon to the local arts scene for seven years now.

Bridge Project 2017, “Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance,” which ran November 3 through 12 and was co-produced by Counterpulse, offered a roster of premieres, including a duet between boychild and Jack Halberstam; Peacock Rebellion’s first full-length show, You Really Should Sit Like a Lady (or how I got to Femme); a solo piece by Maryam Rostami; and a collaborative performance installation by Julie Tolentino at the Joe Goode Annex. An audience salon and a reception with Tolentino and company were also on the program. In all, an often heady but inviting menu. (Indeed, this year’s series came complete with an audience reader, which provided some stimulating context, but there was no penalty for blowing it off.)

Opening night’s program at Counterpulse was a case in point. Turning to practices of the radical body, the conversation took its casually embodied course from the disco icebreaker through a specific set of physical exercises (likely familiar to the performance and yoga practitioners in the audience). It’s probably fair to say there’s been nothing in theaters recently to quite match Judith Butler talking about the politics of precarity and vulnerability while she’s prone on the stage with her head cradled in her interlocutor’s hands.
(That said, let’s acknowledge here Dancers’ Group and Counterpulse for first luring Butler onto the stage and into direct conversation with local queer performance makers back in 2013 as part of Dancers’ Group’s long-running Dance Discourse Project.)

On one level, the evening served up an accessible and stimulating blend of sophisticated queer theory and radical politics alongside personal anecdote and a modest but sincere lovefest across the disciplinary divide—one which the audience was eventually invited to physically join as the conversation ended, the disco ball twirled once more and the dance floor opened to all.

On another, the finessing and even flagrant shrugging off of the usual disciplinary borders put the whole thing on an unsettled footing—not a bad thing at all. In the air were more than ideas, fanzine bio-bits, or the strains of Chic and The Supremes. There was an unspoken but palpable sense of disorientation, along with the slightly giddy wonder at what might happen, when two mutually admiring representatives of two mutually exclusive worlds (art and academe, for short) let their respective guards down. Queering the conversation, for sure.