IN PRACTICE: Dancing Around Race with Gerald Casel

by SIMA BELMAR

**Gerald Casel**: I noticed that there were very few dancers there, like maybe a handful, maybe five. There were choreographer-dancers, but just dancers? The people who take class? I didn’t see very many. To me that was an indication of something. Maybe we need to reach out more to that specific person and make sure that we’re talking to them and they’re totally part of this conversation. I agree that we really didn’t go into the winds. I feel like there was a hesitation on the part of folks. Since I started working on Not About Race Dance, I’ve felt this huge reticence, people holding back, even my closest dance allies and colleagues in the field.

**SB**: What did the experience of reticence look like?

**GC**: When I started that piece there were four white women and me. And there was certainly kinetic hesitation present in the room; there was white fragility. I asked the dancers to write about instances in which they felt racialized. They either withdrew from the process and were totally silent, or they snuck out in small increments. Or they talked about it in other people’s experience, as an observer of racialization.

One of the missions of the project is to mark whiteness, to make it visible. Neil Genz’s Never About AIDS Dance (1994) was highly celebrated. It was an all-white cast. And that was the same year as Bill T. Jones’ Still, Here, which was massacred by [critic] Arlene Croce. It was mostly black and POC, different shapes and sizes. There felt to be a total disappearance. I was there [dancing with Stephen Petronio] in 1994 and actually saw both premières. I wasn’t really conscious of the racial politics and so part of Not About Race Dance is trying to acknowledge the racial politics of that time and to see how it’s become a persistent legacy.

**SB**: But at the public gathering you said we were unhappy with how Not About Race Dance turned out. Why do you feel that way?

**GC**: I wanted more tension. And every time I asked for it, it felt forced. There was all this tension in the rehearsal room but also all this reticence which wouldn’t happen on stage. Also, trying to harness the ideas and themes in the writing and the sometimes very difficult material really hard. I would generate material, they would generate material, and after Split- ing In Our Ankle(s) the whole methodology that includes Cover Your Mouth and Not About Race Dance choreography felt like a colonization force because I’m always teaching them and they’re learning from me; I kept making movements for them to follow. So for a long time I didn’t dance I just gave the dancers instructions. I wanted something different, a little bit more of me dancing, writing together, developing scores or improvisational ideas. But because of the nature of what we’re talking about, it didn’t feel organic or flowing as I imagined it would be.

**SB**: We talked about dance legacies inscribed in the body at the public gathering. What dance legacies are inscribed in yours?

**GC**: I started as a hip hop/paizie baby in Oakland/San Jose. I had such a classical compositional training at Juilliard, with Doris Russell who assisted Louis Horst. When I left Juilliard I didn’t want any of that, I wanted to practice “release” techniques. I met Ralph Lemon and his Folk Dances for my senior jury, which was really a departure. But I felt at home in that material. That’s when I met Michael Clark and Stephen Petronio. I would say I borrowed from Stephen borrowing from Trisha [Brown]. That lineage is very clear. I’ve written about it, processed it a lot. Some days I want to shake it out and have nothing to do with it, and some days it just feels like it’s so deep I can’t undo it. And that’s fine.

Juilliard was richly diverse, at least my class. Not the teachers—they were mostly white. But I was in a class with a Bharatanatyam teacher, and Carolyn Adams, who taught Paul Taylor’s technique. Over time, I started to be a little more aware of who was the population that follows the post-Judson, Stephen, Trisha lineage. And I realized that I was picking up someone else’s history—even though it was in my body it didn’t reflect me. So when I moved back to the Bay Area, I felt, this is where I felt things shift. But I still notice that the choreographic tools that I’m seeing on stage in the Bay Area still look the same. I can’t do that—I have to figure out what I’m existing with, I’m highlighting, and what I feel embcrobed by. I look around at positions of power in dance organizations, studios, companies, artistic directors, boards of directors, and they are mostly white people in the Bay Area. If I’m looking at my own history, not just my dance history but my ancestry [Cassel came to the US from the Philippines in 1978], it doesn’t have anything to do with the reality that I’m from why am I assimilating into a culture that I don’t want to reflect back, to define me?

**SB**: So an immanent critique of dance train- ing and a confrontation with racial politics in the US drive your creative process these days? Is there a kind of relationship—sort of a conversation—the two do you see in the Bay Area?

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GC: At ODC, for example, as an immigrant I find the title “Global Dance Passport” series to describe their “non-Western” classes troubling. Especially in the Mission with many displaced Latinos and Latinx folks, it seems insensitive to assume that through dance we can freely “travel.” Also, I counted all the contemporary and modern dance classes in SF and out of 46, 44 were taught by white women. That was a year ago. But those numbers don’t lie. CounterPulse appears to be doing indigenous performances and honoring the neighborhood, and yet all of their constituents. I said, “Have you looked at your Board of Directors? 26 of them are white.” And she was like, “No I didn’t know that.” So look at the leadership, at the board. What do you mean when you say “diversity program”? When I point it out to people they instantly recoil. You should look, imminent critique, take a look.

Finally, choreographers and dancers need to be in conversation with thinkers and writers more, in the same space more, not just virtual reading space but in rooms together. Dance writers can build bridges for audiences more, in the same space more, not just virtual reading space but in rooms together. Dance writers can build bridges for audiences who come to dance performances and feel like they don’t get it—that anxiety is real. Dance writers can say, calm down, you don’t have to get it, whatever your experiencing, that’s all you get.

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Also, white choreographers need to move back and make space. If you don’t see your privilege or your access, because you’re taking up that space or position, then someone else is unable to occupy it. I’m also asking everyone to write a statement of equity. Like residency programs: what are you doing to make the field more equitable, what are you not doing? A local residency program called me to ask how they can better serve their constituents. I said, “Have you looked at your Board of Directors? 26 of them are white.” And she was like, “No I didn’t know that.” So look at the leadership, at the board. What do you mean when you say “diversity program”? When I point it out to people they instantly recoil. You should look, imminent critique, take a look.

Dance/USA Announces The Equity Project: Increasing the Presence of Blacks in Ballet

The Project brings together a cohort of artistic and executive leaders from 21 large budget, professional ballet organizations for in-person meetings and coaching, with the purpose of increasing the presence of blacks in ballet in all areas of the industry.


dancusa.org

San Francisco Grants for the Arts’ General Operating Support Application Available: Fri, Nov 16, 2018
Deadline to Apply: Fri, Feb 8, 2019

Grants for the Arts is launching a new online platform applications and grant management. Starting this year, the Cultural Data Funder Report will no longer be required.
sfarts.org

On the Ballet in San Francisco: Proposition E

Election Day: Tue, Nov 6

Without raising taxes, Proposition E aims to increase arts funding for the entire arts ecosystem by investing in youth arts programs, cultural centers, cultural districts, individual artists and arts organizations throughout San Francisco. It does this by restoring funding for the arts from the hotel tax.

artsforeveryoneoncom

Oakland Immigrant Artist Mentoring Program Pairs Immigrant Artists with Mentors

Deadline: Dec 2, 2018

The Program, offered in Oakland by New York Foundation for the Arts, fosters a community, providing opportunities to connect with other immigrant artists through group meetings, peer learning, and informal gatherings with program alumni. Through access to other artists, arts professionals, and organizations, the program offers immigrant artists the opportunity to focus on their creative practice, gain support and exposure for their work, while upholding their distinct identities.

The Oakland program is in collaboration with local partners World Arts West, Oakland Asian Cultural Center, Oakland Public Library, Aggregate Space Gallery, and Bisemi Foundation, Inc.

nyfa.org

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| BayAreaSpaces.org

Sadc Fall Performance Season

Nora Sharp: Small Boobs
Nov 9-10 | 8pm

Molly Rose-Williams: Social Movement
Nov 17 | 6pm, 8pm
Nov 18 | 7pm

Winter Salon
Dec 15 | 6pm & 8pm

Ahdan Co Barbier
Buellwether Dance Project
KJ Dahlaw
Roxanne Gray
Michael D. Lee
Ching-chieh Yu

Limited Seating - Get Your Tickets Now!
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Photo: Nora Sharp by Matthew Gregory Holmes

SADCO Community News

There’s More Space Than You Think