

A Conversation with Larissa Velez-Jackson

by EmmaGrace Skove-Epes

Context:

On May 17th, 2012, I went to see Danspace Project Presents: Food for Thought, at St. Mark's Church. The series included three nights of programming, each curated by a recent graduate of Wesleyan University's Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP). The performance I attended was curated by Lydia Bell and titled *A Matter of Practice*. Lydia chose four multimedia artists who, according to her curatorial statement in the program, "use the choreographic tool of transposition" and who "avoid easy categorization, eschewing traditional historicizing and instead inviting what curator and scholar Kellie Jones calls 'reterritorialization,' - 'a way of locating oneself in the world...'"

Larissa Velez-Jackson was the first artist to perform. She performed what she calls a "permanent work-in-progress", titled *Star Crap in Progress (the solo)*. I had never seen Larissa perform before, nor had I heard of her. As a dancer and a fairly regular dance-viewer, I have developed, I think, a pretty rigorously critical outlook on a lot of the work that I see. I am interested in figuring out what moves me and when and why, and conversely, what does not move me, and when and why. I see my criticism of performance and performers as an extension of how important performance is to me; being critical of it is a way of probing my relationship to it and uncovering my values in regards to it. That being said, I do not often see work that I love, or that I feel transported by. Larissa's performance struck me in a way that I had not been struck by a piece of work in a long time. Conceptually, I felt the piece tackled issues of ego and authenticity on stage in a daringly honest and exposed manner. Larissa was a capable and generous performer in her piece: dancing for us, singing to us, speaking to us, telling us jokes, fantasies, and other stories. She was self-reflective and boldly vulnerable.

I felt that the devices and techniques that Larissa used in *Star Crap in Progress (the solo)*, as well as the content of it, and the ever-present drive for honesty and vulnerability present in Larissa's performance, were all very familiar to me. I had seen many other choreographers and performers attempt to capture these same ideas and performance qualities, and I myself had recently attempted to wrangle with similar issues and performance qualities in my own work (successfully? unsuccessfully? I'm still not sure). I felt like Larissa's *Star Crap in Progress (the solo)* spoke directly to me and what I was currently asking the world of dance and performance for permission to do as well as permission to see. For me, Larissa nailed it on the head.

After the show, I planned to write Larissa to convey my thoughts about her piece. Before I had the chance to, I was given an assignment to interview a choreographer by Eva Yaa Asantewaa, whose "Writing on Dance" class I am currently enrolled in at New York Live Arts. I ended up meeting with Larissa to talk about her piece: part interview, part chance for me to compare and contrast my reading of *Star Crap in Progress (the solo)* with Larissa's thoughts and experience of it, and part chance for me to thank Larissa for her performance and for me to gush a little- an opportunity that I unfortunately rarely

take with artists I don't know. Before we met, I had prepared questions, but was delighted to be continually distracted from them over the course of our talk, by wanting to follow other threads of conversation as they arose.

Below is a small excerpt from our much lengthier conversation. I have chosen this particular excerpt not because I think it is any more important or interesting than the rest of our conversation, but because the whole transcribed conversation is fourteen pages single-spaced, and I think this part stands on its own. Certain parts of the excerpt below reference earlier parts of our conversation. I have tried to deliver as "straight" of a transcription as possible ("straight" = as little editing of words as possible) and then chosen to add relevant information and explanations that were not actually a part of this section of our conversation, in brackets []. I have done this to provide you, the reader, with a bit more context for this excerpt, in hopes that this added information will allow you to feel more oriented within our conversation.

Larissa Velez-Jackson: Yeah, if you have a juicy question, I'm ready!

EmmaGrace Skove-Epes: Alright. Well, I am curious, since we've been talking about different audiences and issues of accessibility, who you see as your audience, both actually and ideally? I'm also interested in what you expect from your audience, both in the context of this specific piece as well as in the context of your work on the whole?

LVJ: It's an interesting question because I feel like when I was younger and a little bit more naïve, I imagined a much broader audience for myself, but I also just over-imagined a lot of things! Somehow, having shown work for a few years now and actually seeing what this lifestyle takes has changed things. Seeing what it really is and how things go, and knowing that it is a really slow progression: you have to show, and then stick it out, and wait, really wait it out. It's interesting that I used to imagine this broader audience and somehow make the work for them, but then those weren't the people in the room *actually* watching the work. When I decided to get a little more mature, to distill the work, strip it down a little bit, and go deeper into myself, I feel like it created this allowance to really make the work for the community a little bit more, to not skip over the community that's actually really watching the work, right now. Because I can't imagine some kind of imaginary larger audience for myself when I'm actually performing.

It kind of went along with when I felt guilty about making solo work and wanted to prove to myself, to I don't know who, someone, something, it was again, a kind of similar naivete. I DO want to actually speak directly to my community, I think in the same way that I'm more comfortable speaking to myself and about myself in the work [earlier in our conversation, Larissa and I discussed how she is drawn to being vulnerable on stage and tends to choose very personal content to include in her work]. But then there will always be this urge and this need to not stay within the confines of this scene or this community [the downtown postmodern dance scene, again, this references an earlier part of our conversation]. It doesn't feel right to who I am, or where I'm from, or to all that I'm interested in, which is loads of pop culture AND the New York Yankees AND all of this other stuff. So, in a way I'm allowing all of this other stuff that I'm interested in to be

there, while at the same time, I think staying a little more true to myself and where I actually am right now. Maybe it's even helped some of the jokes in the piece get a little bit more poignant and kind of searing, you know? Because I've located myself as an artist/performer right where I am, here, in my community right now.

There's a big I think pretty risky moment in the piece where I start talking a lot about queerness and queering. I am a heterosexual married woman, and talking about those things on stage feels like a very scary thing to do, for myself, personally. But it comes out of hearing this term "queerness" so much, and sometimes hearing it used to describe work that I actually think has nothing to do with "queerness", but let's say it's made by a homosexual person. I was coming up against this term in so many different avenues: viewing work and being on panels looking at work, and I kept having this thought where I was like, "The Marx Brothers were queer, totally queer!" If this is what it means for a work to be queer, than all of these things these other things that I totally appreciate, are also queer. And I had a gay friend say to me, "You know you think everything is queer because *you* are a queer artist!" And I was like, "Really? I *am*, right?!" And he was like, "Of course you are, what's your problem?" And I was like, "Well, if *you* let me say that, then I'm going to say it."

So I then took ownership of this thing that I feel is just very taboo and very dangerous for me to be throwing around, especially when I think about William S. Burroughs and the way that men at that time talked about being queer, and how that meant potentially being killed if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. So this is where I feel a kind of a guilt and an irresponsibility or a responsibility to the term "queer". This is an example of something that I feel is a real hot-button for me in regards to young people making work at this time.

EGSE: But clearly you feel safe enough to go there with this community, to touch that hot-button.

LVJ: Yeah, well, I feel safe and unsafe!

EGSE: Right, but safe enough to feel unsafe.

LVJ: Well, when I hear "queer" used as a theoretical term, it doesn't describe sexual orientation. And the moment that became clear to me, I felt with full fervor, that I could say, "I am a queer artist." Because my views feel so other-ed most of the time, and being a Puerto Rican and Italian person- within my own family I felt tension and a lot of shame and prejudice in so many ways that have really come to define me as a person. In terms of even sexuality, I feel like feminism hasn't really allowed me to embrace this hyper-feminized persona that I always go toward. But drag culture has. So it feels like I'm actually embracing hyper-femininity through queer drag. There's so much complexity to that, and I feel that the piece has really been a way in which I can tap into that, which is a very personal and a very dynamic tension-provoking terrain for myself and I'm sure for other actually queer artists seeing me do this and knowing that I'm not gay.

EGSE: I don't want to put words in your mouth at all, but hearing you say that you feel more comfortable exploring hyper-femininity through the idea of drag, makes me think about how drag is often something that is obviously put on and affected and performed. As opposed to something that is expected, demanded, and then delivered consciously and/or unconsciously, like hyper-femininity or even not-so-hyper-femininity is for many women. And so I'm wondering if you make any connection between your comfort putting on and performing hyper-femininity through the lens of *queer drag* and the mere fact of being a performer who is comfortable putting on and exploring these types of things on stage. I guess by "things", I mean personas, affects, energies, movements- all of the things that we let ourselves explore in performance on stage.

LVJ: Interesting. I've never necessarily thought of it that way, but I definitely experience that when I'm in full makeup and walking around as a "woman" in the world, that I feel like I'm in full drag. I feel like I'm wearing a mask, I feel like I'm wearing armor, I feel like I become some hyper-exaggerated version of myself that I actually enjoy very much. I feel like there's a lot of sexual power in that, and just soul power. But I'm glad that I feel very comfortable in it and not like that "skin" is being demanded of me. And I think that's where the feminism part comes in for me- and there's even some guilt around that- there's a feeling that I shouldn't be doing that but I want to. And thankfully I'm comfortable not always being that "skin", but I want to have full reign to go there and take it as far as I can. I feel that that comfortability has been afforded to me through homosexual culture.

It's funny, in terms of performing, I've studied ballroom dance for a number of years. I came out of a BFA program in modern dance and got into ballroom dancing and it was the one time that I was allowed to do these ridiculous, hyper-feminine, hyper-sexual gestures that were so foreign to me. You know, actually slinking around like some kind of sexy cat is the mode you're supposed to be in- like when you're doing Latin dancing. I guess I should say that that was only some other avenue..... But it's weird, because maybe some slight aspect of that movement is always a part of my work and what I do. Somehow again it goes back to the dancing. There's something about that physicality and how it's so bound and so set, it's still not a way that I can access that person necessarily, that character, or that way of being.

In this piece, I find that there's so much of this weird- well I don't know if this is the right term but I call it "feminine affect". There's all of this hair-tossing, there's all of this *stuff*. And I will say, one of the first times this was performed- at CPR- there was a very gay male audience on the first night, and they were laughing and laughing and hooting and all this stuff. It was very fun. And then the second day performing this piece, there was a largely female audience, and the reaction to what I was doing was very different. It was mind-boggling to me- I loved it, I was like- wow! Fluffing your hair around, and doing all of these gestures, in front of- I don't even know if they were straight or not- but in front of a female audience was received in such a different way, than it was in front of gay men. It was wild to me.

EGSE: And different how, exactly? Did you feel resistance? Or something else?

LVJ: I don't know, they, the women, were taking it in in a different way. Certainly not applauding and being like, "Yay! Go girl! You go!" No, there was a silent and kind of stone-faced feeling. Very funny. And it reminded me again, it was like-FEMINISM.....

EGSE: Yeah, that can be some deep shit for women.....

LVJ: Yeah! It comes to this again: I actually feel like the way that I am comfortable embodying this person, this character, always comes from dragging. It's always been a curiosity to me- dressing up and all this stuff, but it feels very separate from my.....some other ideals I have- maybe from feminism, I guess. Does that make sense?

EGSE: Yeah. I guess I find it empowering to make it- dressing up and all of this stuff- a conscious choice instead of an unconscious filling of societal expectations. To instead, take "feminine affects" and "feminine presentation" and say, "I'm going to put this on when I want to, and not when I don't." Both on stage and in the rest of my life. That approach is something that- as you point out- drag and queerness seem to embrace in a different way.

To read the full transcription of my conversation with Larissa, email me at emmagrace3@gmail.com! Also, look out for other excerpts in Movement Research's online publication *Critical Correspondence* (<http://movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence>)