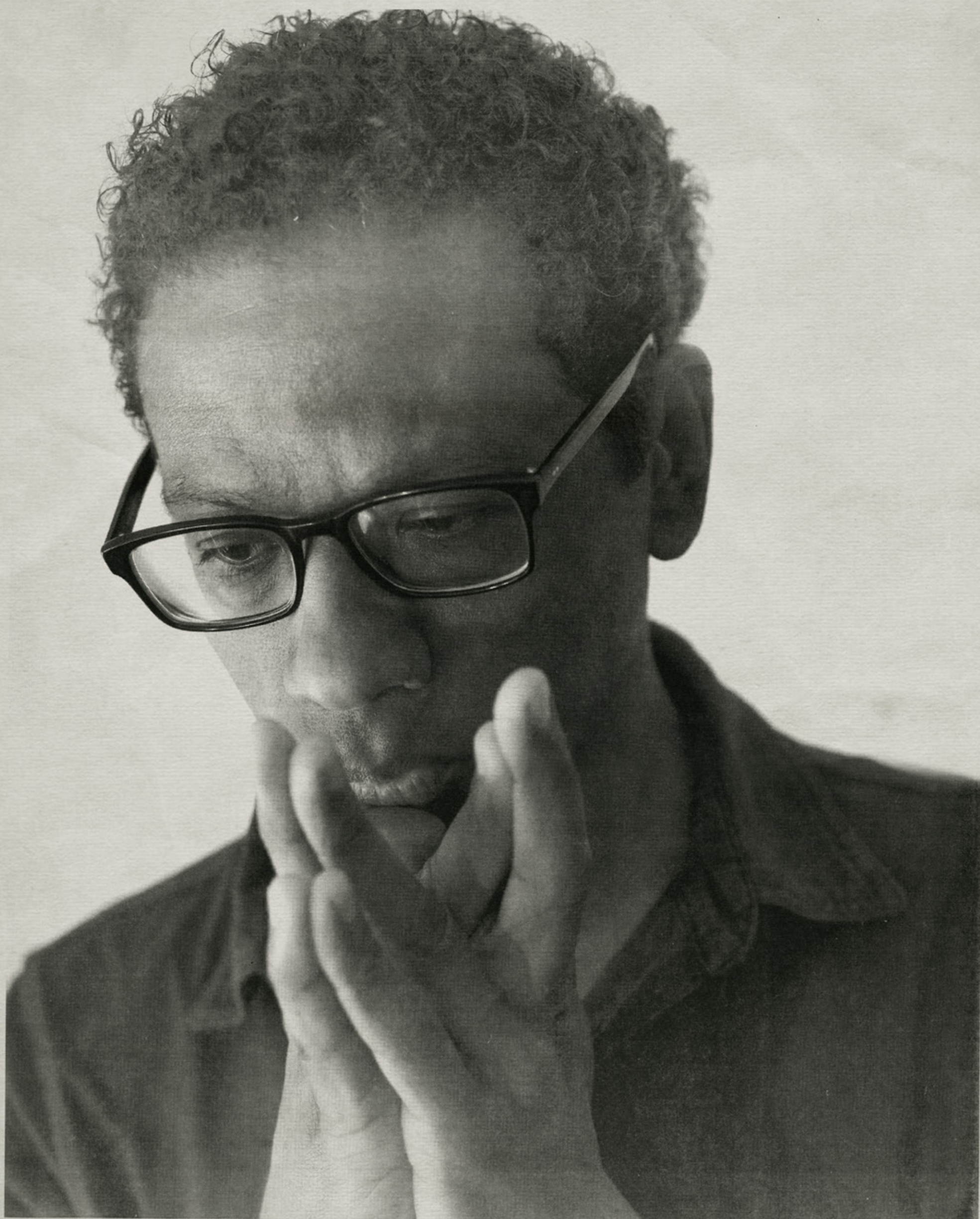




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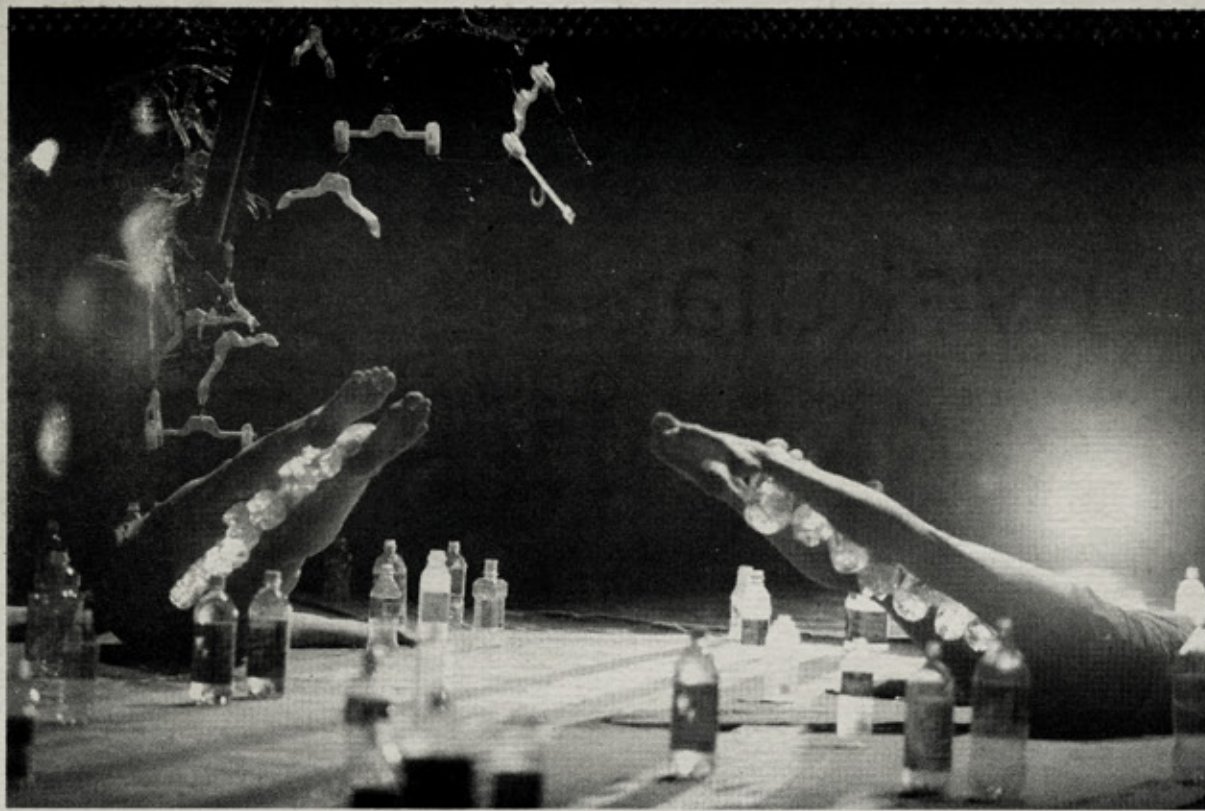


PHOTO: JULIETA CERVANTES

JOHN JASPERSE DEFIES THE MYSTIQUE BRINGING THE DOWNTOWN DANCE 'REAL' WORLD TO BAM

by cristiane bouger

The first impressions of John Jasperse's *Misuse Liable to Prosecution* - a dance work that incorporates a set made of found, borrowed and stolen things - made me think about a wide range of issues I have continued to debate inside myself during these last few years: from global warming and green activism to the most immediate landscape impact of the huge amount of trash that New York City produces.

The image of a large quantity of plastic and wire hangers, part of the set installation at the Harvey Theater, creates an obscure and ambiguous atmosphere. The beauty the installation primarily evokes suddenly becomes quite uncertain when we concentrate on the image of each hanger in the places where light is not much emphasized. In a certain way, the installation seems to highlight the remnants of consumer excessiveness. Beyond the suspended hanger installation, brooms and mop implements, extension cords, a few clothes and milk crates are on the floor inhabiting the environment. Jasperse himself is on the stage as the audience enters, under and surrounded by orange extension cords, he manipulates them over his body.

Suddenly the choreographer approaches forestage with a milk crate and a traffic safety cone that is used as a megaphone. Putting on his glasses he starts to read some considerable statistics through the "safety megaphone". The information ranges from the low-budget production costs, his own annual income and the hourly rates he pays the dancers of his company, to the difference in the amount of money institutions such as BAM and Lincoln Center raise for the artistic productions they embrace. The numbers bring us to a down-to-earth approach of what making non-mainstream dance can mean in New York City. The contrast is even bigger when he presents the amount of money that the USA spends in the war in Iraq (US \$720 million/day) and the annual funds of the National Endowment for the Arts (US \$160 million for 2008).

Through a simultaneously cynical and trustworthy approach, the choreographer de-mystifies the dance world. It is an ironical speech of resistance. Before the awaited 'beginning' of the dance, the audience is introduced to the real world outside the black box and reminded of it in each single element on the stage.

After a solo by Jasperse, the dancers Michelle Boulé, Levi Gonzalez, Eleanor Hullihan and Kayvon Pourazar come to the stage and execute a choreography of duos, followed by a dance with mops over their heads.

The music score was created by Zeena Parkins. Wearing a paper dress made out of FedEx mailers, she plays her electric harp on the left side of the proscenium. On the catwalk of the theater, Matthew Welch and David Watson play Scottish bagpipes. The musicians walk from one side of the catwalk to the other above the spectators. The two musicians seem to respond to Parkins' harp and her pre-recorded electronic sounds, which were created in collaboration with Jim Pugliese, Christian Marclay and Ikue Mori. The musicians' multiple locations create a tri-dimensional sonority, surrounding the audience with the sonic landscape and by extension, with the dance work. In some moments Parkins, Welch and Watson seem to be as connected as jazz improvisers, which enriches the 'liveness' of the whole work.

Among the diverse moments in the dance, a choreography using blue jeans, once an iconoclastic symbol of protest and non-conformist thought, appears on the stage revealing a communal synchronized dance about wearing, folding and unfolding pants.

In another moment, bottles of water are carefully distributed over a gray fabric. This action brings to mind the image of those people on the street who pick them up and make a living from recycling them (and maybe the image of Jasperse himself doing the same in preparing for this show). Boulé and Hullihan dance using the bottles full of water between their legs and inside their t-shirts. Are the dancers simply dealing with the possibilities of the materiality they can afford? Are they stating a possible equivalence with this materiality and by extent, showing us what dance - or art - generally means and what value it has to this society?

Sharing, competition, and fighting are constantly overlapping in *Misuse Liable to Prosecution*. The movement and aesthetic choices create consonance with the title of the piece, putting the dance itself under judgment. It is a dance made of the relation between the bodies and recycled objects from the society they inhabit. Some movements look like they come from improvisation. In other sections the rigor of the choreography clearly appears in the dance. The paper box over Jasperse's body or the beanbag chair used as an instrument of attack among the dancers builds toward the moment it is placed on Jasperse's head, turning him into a blind man. This evolution of events sets up a thin line between the serious and the pathetic.

Jasperse creates an underground world in which a group of people are re-adapting their communication systems and re-creating a society that has sufficiently changed and been disrupted. These systems of communication seem to be developed by the dancers in a world that is a shadow of the capitalist society. Physical disagreements are introduced in the inflatable mattress dance, in which the mattress is sometimes the element that embraces and protects the bodies, but also, the element used by the dancers for pressuring and establishing power over each other.

The light design by Joe Levasseur and Jasperse also presents a duality. The sparkling round fluorescent bulbs create a magical moment, but this effect can also be read as an electric dysfunction in a clandestine space, which makes the effect even more interesting. Not so well related is the small installation of hangers in the bar area of Harvey Theater. Although using the same object, the emphatic floor light enriching the transparency of the hangers gave them a specific plasticity and beauty that is dissonant to what is presented on the stage.

Misuse Liable to Prosecution is powerful in its refusal of the "beautiful" universe of dance. It boldly deals with the implicit risk in bringing such aesthetics to the stage. The very specific topography Jasperse brought to BAM is probably not what people expect from a show at Harvey Theater.

Resisting by making dance even with no money is a strong political act incorporated by a lot of choreographers struggling with critical budget limitations. Although Jasperse's company is recognized in the field and receives grants from several institutions, art programs and foundations, it is clear that being an awarded choreographer in USA does not make the life of the artist safer or more comfortable.

Certainly, this is not new information for those who have a certain familiarity with the realm of dance. However, when the information is given without any grief or sorrow just before the dance starts, it leads any viewer who engages and loves this art form to an unpleasant surprise. At the same time, it brings a big worry to young artists who want to embrace dance as their careers. The commitment of those artists on the stage is immediately emphasized and empowered.

The fact is that art - at least the sort of work referred to in this article - has no functional value to the market society and does not work to favor the maintenance of the status quo. So, we have to face another fact: we are somehow marginal¹ in this society. The strange displacement here is that some "marginal" artists have reached the established media vehicles, festivals, fundraising programs and established institutions which makes everything a little bit confusing and unclear to those who simply read the newspapers, buy the ticket and go to see the dance. Artists who have reached the status Jasperse has, inhabit a double-faced reality: one full of accomplishments and grants for their productions, and the other a quotidian practical life that ironically does not change much from the days they held the status of emerging artist, when their days were not so golden or bright with invitations and achievements.

Living this duality gives to this art scene a very specific contour full of irreverence and braveness. For long weeks I kept thinking how I really felt about this dance. Even though it does not come toward my aesthetic preferences I have to say that does not change the importance I see in this work.

His dance was not romantic, but nonetheless I give myself the right to embrace a romantic quality by stating that John Jasperse is a hero.

You certainly know he is not alone in this town.

CRISTIANE BOUGER (Brazil, 1977) is a theatre director, dramaturge, performer and video artist. She works and lives in New York. bouger@cristianebouger.com. She thanks Brandi Copher for her English classes.

Footnote:

1. I am referring here to a conversation I had once with Dean Moss about our value to this society, as well as the red-flag piece by the Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica (1937-1980) in which is written: "Be Marginal, Be Hero." Even though the context of this piece refers to a political statement regarding a drug dealer killed by the police in a favela in Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s - a time in which drugs were romanticized - the slogan addresses the option for living outside the status quo, searching for one's own revolution.

Misuse Liable to Prosecution, choreography and visual design by John Jasperse was presented as part of the 25th Next Wave Festival, at BAM Harvey Theater, from October 31st to November 3rd, 2007. Music Score by Zeena Parkins. Lighting Design by Joe Levasseur and John Jasperse. Performed by Michelle Boulé, Levi Gonzalez, Eleanor Hullihan, John Jasperse, and Kayvon Pourazar.



PHOTO: JULIETA CERVANTES

CRITICAL ESSAY