

IN PRACTICE: Dancing Around Race with Gerald Casel

by SIMA BELMAR

ON SEPTEMBER 20 OF THIS YEAR, approximately fifty Bay Area dance folks gathered for a Long Table discussion at Humanist Hall in Oakland as part of Hope Mohr Dance’s Bridge Project 2018 Community Engagement Residency, *Dancing Around Race*. The conversation was the first of three public gatherings organized by the residency’s Lead Artist, Gerald Casel, and featured Aruna D’Souza, art historian and author of *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in Three Acts*. D’Souza is a brilliant thinker who spoke eloquently about racial inequity in the visual art world, and the Long Table format afforded participants the space and language to discuss the question of racial equity in Bay Area dance. But in a room full of choreographers, dancers, dance administrators, dance presenters, and dance writers, we somehow managed to dance around the subject—not of race, but of dance.

Maybe it was because the invited interlocutor came from the visual art world and not the dance world. I’ve long thought that 20th century Western concert dance discourse struck a devil’s bargain by positioning itself first within discourses of visual art (e.g. the Clement Greenberg club), and then within the conceptual frameworks of literary theory (beginning with Susan Foster’s *Reading Dancing*), to legitimize and make itself legible to a broader public. Although many writers work to find language to describe “the different ways dance does what it does” (as dance scholar Jacqueline Shea-Murphy, author of *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, put it at the gathering), when it comes to talking about what dance artists do that constitutes expert knowledge, I’ve often found a strange reticence.

For example, when Judith Butler was invited to speak about gender and performativity at the July 18, 2013 Dance Discourse Project, I asked a question about what dance as a practice may offer as a way to explore or understand the very concept of gender performativity, given that both take embodied behavior as their matter. I remember the moderator, Julie Phelps, dismissing my question as somehow reifying of dance as a movement practice wholly unlike the everyday embodied practices that Butler had been discussing. Didn’t I know that it was woefully unhip to talk about dance as an art form with unique characteristics? How awfully modernist of me! Had I not read my French theory?

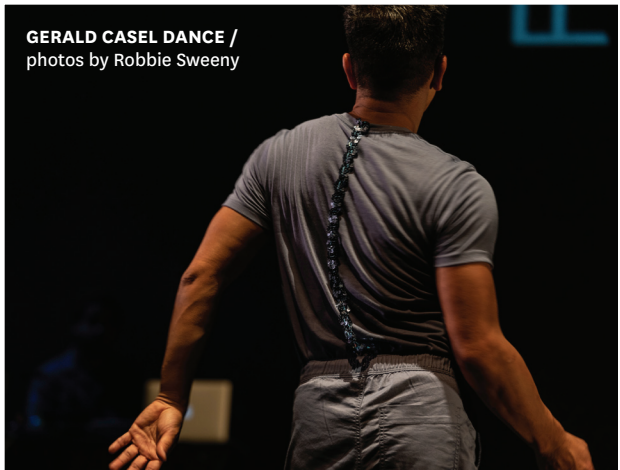
But that was not my point. I don’t regard Capital D-dance as a monolith. My question had to do with what people who devote their lives to dancing, making dances, supporting dance, and even viewing dance have to teach the rest of the world. The guiding questions for the *Dancing Around Race* conversation were: What obstacles get in the way of racial equity in the Bay Area dance community? What does it look/feel like to have racial equity in dance? What does the future look like? How do we get there?—all great questions. But I wanted to ask, How might dance practices, in their medium-specificity and cultural context, help us address practical questions of how to cultivate racial equity? And what are dance’s blind spots to racial equity? It seems to me that any analysis of how the Bay Area dance community (or dance communities, as choreographer Byb Chanel Bibene rightly pointed out) can improve racial equity requires a deep acknowledgement and investigation of the methodologies and discourses that are grounded in their disciplinary expertise.

To be fair, there were efforts to turn the conversation towards specific dance-related issues. There was a question about decolonizing dance training, to which David Herrera, one of the members of the *Dancing Around Race* artist cohort, said, “It’s about getting rid of stuff in our bodies passed down by teachers and mentors.” Hope Mohr asked about how we determine criteria for good art, which launched a discussion about mastery and virtuosity. Yayoi Kambara, another member of the cohort, said we need to ask ourselves how we value what is good, beautiful, or true. Jess Curtis takes a performance studies approach, asking what a dance does, “Who does it change?” And Jacqueline Shea-Murphy pointed out that terms like mastery, virtuosity, innovation are inscribed in a system, and that the modes of doing things, like gathering energy, “can’t be sensed until you’ve been with them a long time...a different kind of sensing means the terms may not be the terms.”

I didn’t ask my questions at the gathering, but I did ask them when I got together with Gerald Casel a week after. We talked about the conversation and about the work he showed at ODC Theater in June, the premiere of *Cover Your Mouth When You Smile*, and a preview of *Not About Race Dance*. I wanted to know why he had said at the gathering that *Not About Race Dance* failed to reveal whiteness through structures as he had hoped it would. I wanted to know how he mobilized Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry practically in the creation of the dance. Gerald was unflinchingly honest, forthright, humble, thoughtful—another magical conversation with another magical Bay Area dance artist.

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Sima Belmar: *Dancing Around Race* did a great job talking about race and art/culture more broadly, but the dance expertise in the room wasn’t tapped. Aruna talked about visual arts, and institutionally, there are some similarities. But even with post-



modern dance inhabiting the white spaces of the museum more and more these days, the visual art, museum model of reflection feels lacking. When we go to an art exhibit we’re not watching the artist’s labor in real time. The body of the artist is simply not on display in the same way the dancing body is. The artist alone in her atelier is simply not the usual structure of rehearsal. The way the artist feels making sculpture or painting is simply not the stuff of art history. (Though it should be.) Dance is a discipline, an interdisciplinary discipline to be sure, but a discipline nonetheless. And its workers know things that other kinds of cultural workers do not know. Why are we so loathe to share our expertise?

“I’m asking everyone to write a statement of equity.”

—GERALD CASEL

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 weeds. 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 studio.

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 it 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 Greenberg’s *Not 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 discrepancy. I was there [dancing with Stephen Petronio] in 1994 and actually saw both premieres. 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 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 avoidance, which is what maybe happened on stage. Also, trying to harness the ideas and themes in the writing and put them into a compositional form was really hard. I would generate material, they would generate material, and after *Splinters in Our Ankles* [the first of the trilogy that includes *Cover Your Mouth* and *Not About Race Dance*] choreography felt like a colonizing force because I’m always teaching them and they’re learning from me; I kept making movement 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’d 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/jazz baby in Oakland/San Jose. I had such a classical compositional training at Juilliard, with Doris Rudko 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 did 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 a lot of tools 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 (except for Indrani – who was my 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 am I resisting, what am I highlighting, and what I feel encumbered 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 [Casel came to the US from the Philippines in 1978], it doesn’t have anything to do with the reality that I’m seeing so 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 training and a confrontation with racial politics in the US drive your creative process these days. What sort of relationship between 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 residents 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 leadership is white. It’s so clear, after watching the Kavanaugh hearings, that the top has to change, we have to shake up leadership in this country from the bottom up, all the way up.

SB: What do you think are the Bay Area dance community’s blind spots to racial equity?

GC: We have to first acknowledge that there is inequity. For example, I was on the CASH grant panel and noticed that some people have had more access to education than others. Some choreographers are better writers than others, it’s a fact that we can see, but we’re evaluating them on their writing. We have to acknowledge that, and the CASH grantors already do. There are a lot of workshops, webinars, that people don’t take advantage of, in part because we don’t disseminate the information well. Maybe we can do better.

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.

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 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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community news

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.

The ballet organizations confirmed to participate in the three-year program are: American Ballet Theatre, Atlanta Ballet, Ballet Austin, Ballet Memphis, Boston Ballet, Charlotte Ballet, Cincinnati Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Miami City Ballet, Nashville Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, New York City Ballet, Oregon Ballet Theatre, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Richmond Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, School of American Ballet, Texas Ballet Theater, and The Joffrey Ballet.

danceusa.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.

sfgfta.org

On the Ballot 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.

artsforeveryonesf.com

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.

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