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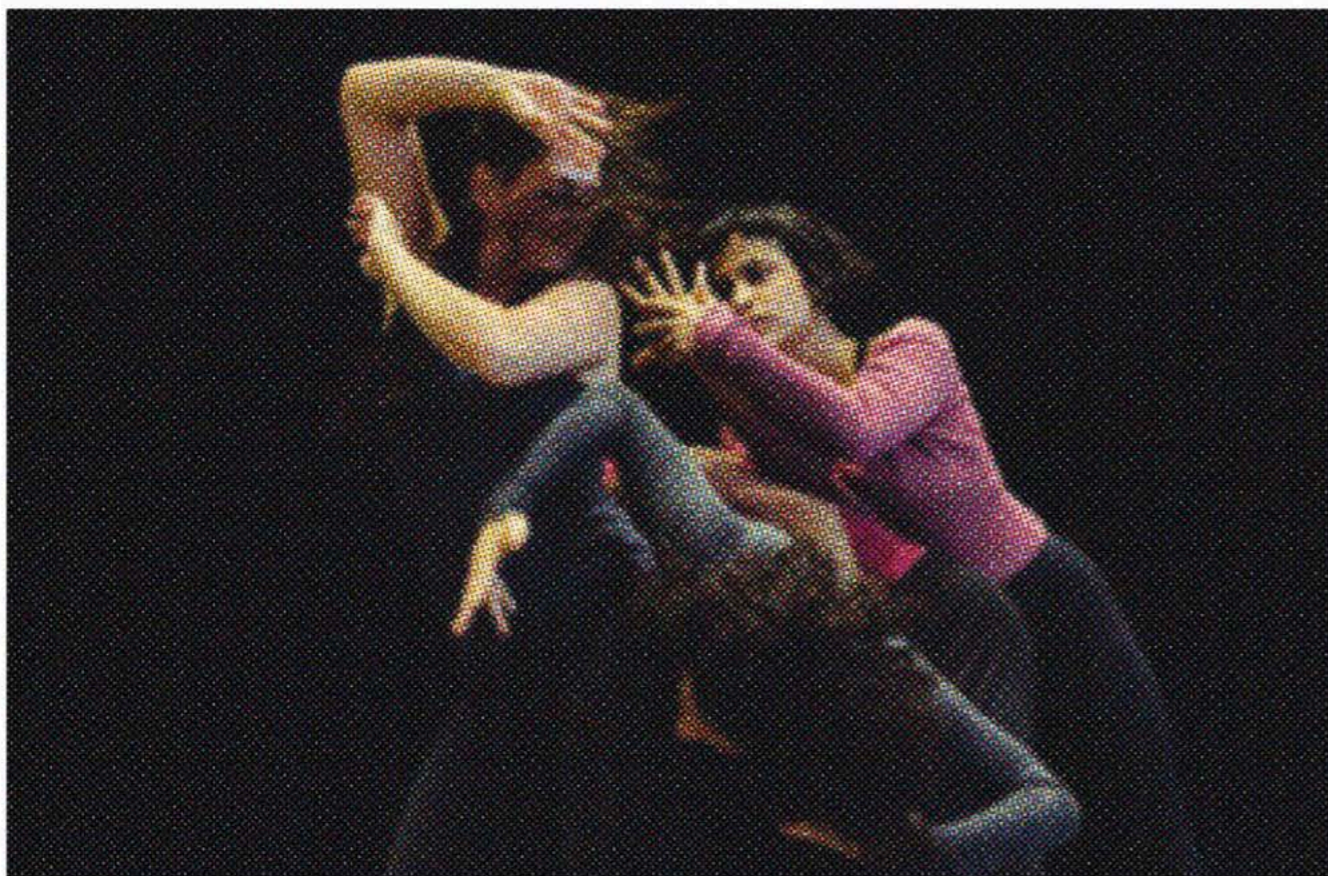
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Recreating vs. Representing



An intersectional dialogue about gendered violence onstage

BY AMELIA EHRHARDT, IN CONVERSATION WITH LEE SU-FEH, ALEXA MARDON AND ROSHANAK JABERI

Irma Villafuerte, Katie McCollough, Victoria Mata and Nickeshia Garrick in *No Woman's Land*, Jaber Dance Theatre / Photo by Kat Sandler

This article discusses violence and sexual assault.

I was approached to convene this conversation after a particular social media fire I initiated. After seeing a substantially popular show by a male artist of colour at a very large festival receive a standing ovation, I was left feeling sick to my stomach. I felt brutally angry at the choreographer for the inclusion of what I read as a rape scene.

I'm not naming the show or the choreographer, because – and here's the familiar refrain – it's not about him. For reasons of fairness to him, space for these issues at stake and my own psychological wellness, I don't wish to go over the details of how I was wrong in that instance. Instead, I'd like to begin the following conversation and open up the dialogue to talk about representations of gendered and sexual violence in contemporary dance practices.

In the new conversation that ensued, Roshanak Jaber started another post on social media, this time lamenting Eurocentric lenses of viewership in the dance community here – a subtle callout to me. Following this, she generously engaged me in a challenging and rich conversation in private.

Like many white people before me, getting called out on ignorance (and at its roots, embedded racism) stirred the worst in me. The desire to be one of the good white people is so deep and counterproductive. Jaber, as well as other women of colour, kindly pointed out to me that different lenses of viewership might make what I saw look less like a rape scene and more like a story that needs to be told; that had I been more familiar with the story, I would have been able to contextualize it; that people who come from or are living in conflict regions have extremely different relationships to representations of violence than I do. These points all resonated and gave me the uncomfortable, familiar feeling of noticing my own prejudice.

And yet (this is not a but), I was approached privately by many other women who shared that they too felt uncomfortable watching this scene. A diverse array of women who shared that their own experiences with sexual violence made that moment resonate and, like me, disengaged for the rest of the performance either in anger or trauma. I say this to bring attention to the issue of representing sexual violence onstage as a complicated and multi-layered one that doesn't boil down to a glib one-off response of, "Should this famous man in this particular dance have grabbed a woman, performed choreographed sexual acts and then thrown her aside at the end?" The question that, with Jaber and others' help, I came to for myself was, "What is the effect of representing sexual violence in contemporary dance?"

Jaber, Lee Su-Feh and Alexa Mardon agreed to engage in a conversation with me about it. We had a lesson in patience

working through WhatsApp, and the ensuing conversation was two hours long and appropriately intersectional. I am thankful to them for their engagement with me, this topic and also for their emotional labour throughout the process. This conversation took place in the throes of the #metoo social media campaign, so sexual violence and its heavily gendered statistics were once again at the front of many people's minds. Notably, the conversation was going to involve another participant who called me twenty minutes before we were about to start, upset and asking to rescind because they were feeling too triggered, too raw from all the work going on at the moment. Then, in the half-hour before the conversation started, I developed a random allergic reaction and biked through a windstorm to get emergency antihistamines. In the weeks before this conversation and writing, I plowed through a bit, pretending I wasn't going to feel it, but really, the body knows.

There's no capacity for conclusion to this, but as I and my sisters and siblings and anyone who has had the status of women applied to them can attest, a lot of us are mad. It's worth a mention that men who have experienced sexual violence are silenced because of the shame involved in sharing their vulnerability. A lot of us are mad and silenced.

This two-hour typed conversation is impossible to bring into linear tidiness. The issues involved are not linear or tidy – as Lee said, "It's f***ing complicated is what it is." We started off trying to be organized, not typing over each other, answering questions one by one. I tried to facilitate a start to the conversation with the question, "What is the effect that representations of sexual violence have on an audience?" Nearly everybody stated that they couldn't speak for audiences but spoke only for themselves, from their perspectives. Jaber, as an artist who works with imagery of violent subject matter, talked about why it's *important* to go there:

For many people like myself, who come from conflict regions, our motivation for creating and viewing art can be different. I create art in part as an act of solidarity, drawing on individual stories to highlight larger and more complex issues of systematic violence and oppression, which for me carries a different sense of urgency and necessity. In my opinion, both artists and audiences have a responsibility in their relationship to the creation and the viewership of the work. Art is a privilege and one that requires me to be truthful onstage, even if that means evoking uncomfortable images at times. I don't believe that gratuitous violence onstage serves any purpose, which is why framing and context are critical. I also don't believe in creating work that denies the truth of others in order to make it more palatable for audiences of a dominant culture.

I was struck by the thought that watching someone else

experience violence could be educational for someone who does not have an experience of violence. I wonder if noticing the somatic reflection in your body of seeing choreographic evocations of rape and violence can play a role in mitigating these acts. I have always had a huge issue with representations of violence onstage, a bias against it even, particularly sexual violence – even in works that are made by survivors, with survivors, that are made with care and consent of all parties. My thought process went something like this: Why recreate this? What is the purpose of representing the worst of humanity? But there was another possibility I hadn't considered: by showing this violence to people who are statistically not as likely to experience it, perhaps it serves as an educational or empathetic tool.

However, even in the scenario in which responsible artists come together to deal with sexually violent subject matter in a non-explicit and consent-driven way, audience members can be triggered. Framing is crucial: I am a definite supporter of trigger warnings, but they put the onus on the audience member to make an uninformed decision about how material they haven't yet seen could potentially affect them, and they can be seen as removing the responsibility from producers, curators and artists in having developed and presented material that is triggering. Either way, it is up to the victim to take on the labour. This came up in our discussion around the #metoo campaign:

Lee Su-Feh It seems to me that very few people work from an acknowledgement of power. It seems much easier to work from a position of victimhood.

Amelia Ehrhardt I agree with you, and it seems then that the focus is constantly on victims.

LSF Let's take the #metoo performance, for instance. Does saying '#metoo, I have been sexually assaulted,' extend to '#metoo I have been complicit in rape culture'?

Alexa Mardon I wonder about quiet and loud work. Does the work of people who are working on their complicity need to be loud? I work with survivors of sexual violence and I really don't have an answer for that, not a satisfactory one. ... There are so many ways people choose to heal or move forward, and sometimes those ways are loud and sometimes they are quiet. If people with power examine how they are wielding it, that is a great start and [this needs to happen] across lines of race, gender, artistic support.

It's worth noting here that the conversation did not revolve around the majority of works involving sexually violent imagery. The problem is not with artists working responsibly on the real living effects of sexual violence in the day-to-day life of survivors. The problem is with the tragic ubiquitousness of sexually violent imagery in dance, most notably and frequently in contemporary



Lee / Photo by Marc Schreiner

western concert dance forms, including contemporary ballet. (I use "western" throughout this piece to describe western European and white American concert dance forms rooted in ballet while acknowledging that this term erases hip hop, street dance, tap and other American forms from the lineage of western concert dance, and that the term itself is problematic.) Choreography involving (young, flexible, beautiful) women being physically manipulated, thrown around, pushed, pulled, shoved – legs splayed open, fearful looks in their eyes – is shockingly common and generally unquestioned. Although, it has been more openly criticized in recent years than ever before, with widely shared comments from dance critics Siobhan Burke and more locally, Martha Schabas. But the fact that the art form has to be criticized by notable writers for the conversation to gain momentum feels distressing. In the words of my friend and brilliant activist Syrus Marcus Ware, "We better do better."

It's not like we're just talking about the seemingly impenetrable and not so day-to-day experience of going to the ballet: this is common stuff. I have seen this imagery repeated again and again, on small stages and large. I have sat in the talkbacks where choreographers denied even the possibility that this material represented sexual violence and I have read

the program notes that simply made no mention of it. What is it in the training of western concert dance that makes us blind to imagistic readings of watching women literally get pushed around? What in our training and socialization makes us think that this can look like anything other than something that shouldn't be happening?

These questions arose during the conversation and, as someone whose training history is really rooted in western concert dance forms, with a lot of ballet, I know that I am deeply engrained by the way this art form, so dear to me, has imprinted a performance of the patriarchy into my posture in a way many years of somatic education and unlearning and relearning has yet to undo. Mardon said this saliently in our conversation, after Jaberri raised the point that women could have agency in these roles. "I think agency in white contemporary dance is slippery." She continues, "It's an institution based on obedience, especially for women."

However, this obedience can instill also a defensiveness,

rendering some of us (and I count myself among this "us") hypersensitive to imagery we read as gendered violence. Lee shared an instance of a time when her work was misread as performing gendered violence toward women, and she discussed her responsibility as a choreographer.

LSF I have made works where the female dancer had agency and yet the reading of the work was problematic. I, as the choreographer, then had to figure out how to reveal that agency within the work.

AM What was that work like for you, Su-Feh? The work of revealing, that is.

LSF Also, let's be clear that both men and women can be complicit in the perpetuating of patriarchy. The revealing. There were dominance and submission ideas at work. The final scene was a 'fight' where one dancer would 'die.' We would not



Mardon and Erika Mitsuhashi in their own work *New Beginnings*, presented at Slip(page) / Photo by Sepehr Samimi

I WONDER ABOUT QUIET AND LOUD WORK. DO PEOPLE WHO ARE WORKING ON THEIR COMPLICITY NEED TO BE LOUD?

~Alexa Mardon



Ehrhardt in her own work *solo dances to nobody documented in still images only*, Gibraltar Point, Toronto Island / Photo by Ehrhardt

know which one would die. In the early iterations of the work, when the woman died, it looked like male on female violence. To reveal the randomness of the death, that it wasn't always the woman who died, we had to rewrite some of the text. We also placed a board that had the history of all the 'results' so far – hoping to reveal that it wasn't always a woman who died. God knows if it worked. But David [McIntosh] and I took that on as our responsibility.

AE Did you introduce this tactic after receiving criticism on the reception and optics of the work?

LSF Yes.

AE Had these problematics been a conversation in the studio before receiving the criticism, or had it not occurred to you because you knew everyone had agency, consent was being discussed, etc.?

LSF It had not occurred to us because there was consent in the room.

Around this point in the conversation, things turned to intersectional modes of viewership and understanding. We discussed social media and its merits and failings as a platform for discussion. Social media starts these conversations as much as it frequently ends them.

Roshanak Jaber I hope that these conversations can happen more in person rather than social media. I don't find shaming someone into hiding useful because they'll continue to hold on to their prejudices, except now in private.

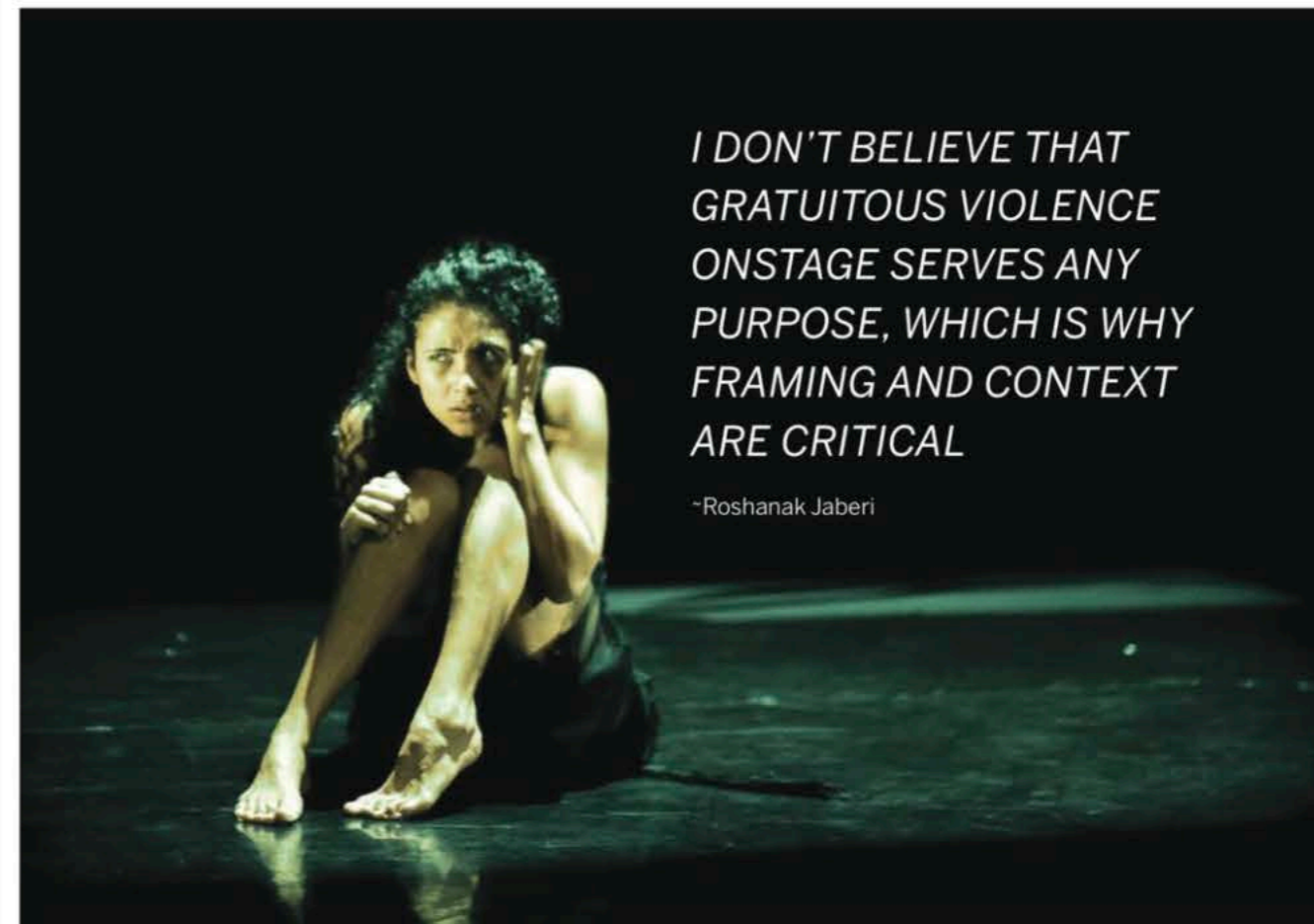
AE Exactly, they just hold their thoughts along with bitterness



Alicia Grant and Nicole Rose Bond in *Dancemakers' Artist-in-Residence Andrea Spaziani's Silver Venus* / Photo by Omer Yukseker

in private. I've also seen the callout/shaming culture lead to isolation and depression. This is not the goal.

Because this conversation was instigated on social media, our subsequent conversation was caught up in issues that had a lot to do with me – me not recognizing whiteness as a factor in my watching and understanding of the moment I wrote about on my Facebook page. At the same time, it is the lens of whiteness that made me blind to this in the first place. Because one of the enduring impacts of colonialism is the idea that whiteness – white ways of looking – are “neutral,” it's imperative to remind myself that I am understanding something (or making something) because of my specific upbringing and background, which just so happens to correspond to a dominant culture. In this vein, Mardon stated, “It occurs to me that if one is not actively trying



I DON'T BELIEVE THAT GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE ONSTAGE SERVES ANY PURPOSE, WHICH IS WHY FRAMING AND CONTEXT ARE CRITICAL

– Roshanak Jaber

Lina Jimenez in Jaber's *Behind the Stained Walls* / Photo by Nzeghwua Anderson

to disrupt what the accepted narratives are around power and violence, then we are complicit.” Both Jaber and Lee expressed that their experience is different: Jaber emphasized, “People of colour rarely demand that white artists provide an explanation of their work, yet I continually find myself in spaces where we are expected to explain our position.”

A fear I've had while writing this piece is that it would be hopelessly imperfect. I should correct that: something I knew would happen with this writing is that it would be hopelessly imperfect. The cross-section of contributors could never be adequate (where are the trans voices, the non-binary voices?). In addition, the word limitation of even a feature article cannot begin to convey the complexity of these issues. Are we talking about dance enough? But a fear that our thoughts will be imperfect keeps way too many people from contributing to conversations all the time. I am absolutely not someone who believes that “political correctness” is a hindrance to conversation or a stifling of free speech. I do believe that the problems with callout culture often keep silent the voices most likely to stay silent. People who are not expecting to be challenged on their opinions speak first, loudest. There is also a myth in some environments that dance is not political, or that dance artists do not have to be politically

engaged. Dance artists are radically practising empathy all the time and therefore should be leaders for change on this matter. Dance holds a particular position in conversations about race, gender, sexuality and violence in the arts, in part because of the very visible reality that bodies are on the line. Because it has to do with bodies, everything feels so damn close: How do you begin to talk about a practice or a work that is in your very bones but may be causing hurt to other people? How do you disentangle your somatic memory from ego and participate in conversations without defensiveness? But a way bigger question is, how do we address these issues if we continue to train dancers not to speak? ■

Sommaire

Sur les talons de la campagne #moiaussi et un dialogue déjà entamé sur les représentations de la violence sexuelle et genrée sur scène, Amelia Ehrhardt anime une discussion sur la représentation dans les pratiques de danse contemporaine. Le sujet est intrinsèquement intersectionnel. Roshanak Jaber, Lee Su-Feh et Alexa Mardon réfléchissent ensemble aux enjeux : comment l'acte d'observer n'est jamais neutre ou objectif : pourquoi l'encadrement et le contexte sont essentiels dans la présentation de matière difficile ; et comment, en danse, les artistes et les corps sont véritablement exposés.