



indance

September 2014



44 Gough Street, Suite 201
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(top) NAKA Dance Theater, Sep 19–21 / Photo by Steven Sanchez, (bottom) Hope Mohr Dance, Pictured: Simone Forti, Sep 26–27 / Photo by Jason Underhill

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Welcome

WHILE TACKLING DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES, I multi-task, listening on the radio to music, news, game shows, and the wonderful tales presented on programs like *This American Life*. A few weeks ago, while paying bills, I heard a story about how much our culture enjoys making lists. The researcher described that even when something has accomplished, list-makers like myself will write down the task—optometry appointment, gas for the car, renew membership to Dancers' Group—just so we can cross off the task on a list. It's so completely satisfying. Ever since the story ran, I've been observing how I concoct lists—and how others' list-making skills make me envious—and the question arose: where did writing down things to do, to chronicle, to dream about, originate?

In my research I found an intriguing piece by the novelist Umberto Eco about the making of lists in which he stated, "The list is the origin of culture. It's part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order — not always, but often." The quote comes from Eco's *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay*, now on my list to read.

Making lists has such a yin and yang appeal to me: they can be practical, such as a shopping list, or fantastical, like dancing on the Paris Opera House stage, or being featured on page one of the NY Times. Then there are the private lists, like accounting for sexual partners, and I cannot reveal the length of mine. To make a list is to categorize the times of our lives, a simple way to acknowledge them, and create order.

By way of introduction to the engaging articles featured this month, I've made a list of quotes from contributors, hoping to intrigue you into making your own list, or to copy mine. It represents works that range in theme from fantasy, to connection and sharing, to the stories of homeless older women, to gentrification, to police brutality.

Carolina Lugo's & Carolé Acuña's Ballet Flamenco, Sep 6–28 / Photo courtesy of Carolé & Carolina



It's a partial list; see the calendar for additional performances to add to yours.

"Their creative process is careful to not knife along the same wounds the young artists experience on the streets of San Diego, Mexico and East Oakland." —Marvin K. White

"Will it scare, delight, or intrigue? Will it expand them [the audience] or make them feel limited?" —Jo Kreiter

"How can one integrate his or her life and everyday experiences into the world of performance?" —Lenora Lee

"Performance for me is all about a sense of community." —Charles Moulton

"It is an occasion to increase your knowledge base—building time in the theater, building knowledge about how each system works, and most important, building relationships." —Mary Armentrout

"Collaborations enable me to challenge my own, and ultimately the audience's, pre-conceived notions of these traditions [Kathak and Flamenco]." —Pandit Chitresh Das

Eco also has an existential thought, "We like lists because we don't want to die."

I concur! The creative impulse reflects our strong will to give back, to survive, to create a connection to our past, present and future; so please, keep making work and, lists.

—Wayne Hazzard

IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 / A Roving Elegy: *The Anastasio Project* by Marvin K. White
- 3 / Jo Kreiter Brings Attention to Older Homeless Women by Nirmala Nataraj
- 4 / Critical Dialogues by Rachel Howard
- 5 / Falling Forward Into New Spaces with Mary Armentrout by Heather Desaulniers
- 6 / September Performance Calendar
- 8 / Expanding Possibilities with Garrett and Moulton by Kate Mattingly
- 9 / Lenora Lee: Sharing Stories Through Dance and Film by Rob Taylor
- 11 / Kathak and Flamenco Traditions Explored by Charlotte Moraga

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: Jo Kreiter Brings Attention to Older Homeless Women

by NIRMALA NATARAJ

ISADORA DUNCAN Award-winning choreographer Jo Kreiter draws from a variety of disciplines and lenses: gymnastics, Chinese pole acrobatics, social justice and urban revitalization, to name a few. Along with her apparatus-based aerial dance company, Flyaway Productions, Kreiter is helming a new site-specific work entitled *Multiple Mary and Invisible Jane*. With a set comprising architectural and fabricated steel objects and an 80-foot wall, the performance showcases unabashed female athleticism and a feminist claiming of space. In fact, because the final work is centered around the plight of older homeless women, it is quite literally a poetic interrogation of public space and how it affects us, as well as how our bodily and psychic realities are demarcated by our sense of place. It is a work that, like many of Kreiter's previous pieces, is simultaneously transcendent (given the figures that whirl and strut against the skyline) and grounded in realities that hit closer to home.

"My work is really dedicated to exposing the range and power of female physicality, and it is also dedicated to exploring the experiences of women in a misogynist society," says Kreiter. "But it's inviting and contemplative rather than something that hits you over the head with a hammer."

The piece came about in the aftermath of the company's 2012 work, *Niagara Falling*, which specifically looked at urban poverty by examining the lives of people who lived on 6th Street and Old Falls Street in Niagara Falls. Kreiter says her only dissatisfaction was that the piece wasn't created with enough of a specifically feminist lens. Kreiter's vision for the current work had its genesis when she met with her colleague Rose Aguilar (one of the co-creators of *Multiple Mary and Invisible Jane*). Aguilar had recently written an article about older homeless women, highlighting the unique difficulties faced by this virtually invisible population. That was when Kreiter knew she wanted to join forces with Aguilar to create a piece that would depict the struggles of these women. Aguilar's source material provided Kreiter with fodder for *Multiple Mary and Invisible Jane*.

"ONE THING ALL OF THE WOMEN WHO CONTRIBUTED ORAL HISTORIES SPOKE ABOUT WAS THE EXPERIENCE OF SLEEPING IN A CHAIR...WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO SLEEP SITTING UP."

—Jo Kreiter

Aguilar, who was connected with Episcopal Community Services in San Francisco, was able to help collect oral histories from a variety of older women. Kreiter says that through Aguilar's networks, they were able to collect stories ranging from experiences of home foreclosure to the vulnerability of sleeping on the streets. Hastings College of the Law also advocated for the project and donated the wall that will be used for the performance.

Kreiter's work with her long-time collaborator, Pamela Z, evokes a specific style of artistic engagement with oral histories. "Pamela [Z] works with word as sound...I comb through the oral histories and decide what is important for an audience to know about, and she turns their language into music."

Of course, the collaboration entails many other components, such as the set and rigging design, buy-in from the building owner and the insight of the public. "Finally, we have the dancers translate images into movement, which is also a collaborative process," explains Kreiter.

Because the piece focuses on the way we envision public space and how it is experienced by disparate populations, Flyaway Productions relies on manifestations of the subject in the movements of the dancers, as well as the set. In its creation, the piece moved from broad, important ideas to literal representations of these concepts. "The literal part happens with the set design," says Kreiter. "One thing all of the women who contributed oral histories spoke about was the experience of sleeping in a chair... what it was like to sleep sitting up." So the company designed a series of chairs to be mounted onto the performance wall. The opening section of the piece takes viewers through the "universal" experience of discomfort, and the chair becomes a symbol around which the rest of the choreography and source material pivot.

"Some choreographers create their dance, which then informs the set. We do it in reverse," says Kreiter. "We always go from concept to set to dance, because site-specific performances must fit into some very real physical constraints."

For instance, the dancers are performing on an 80-foot wall but nothing can directly be bolted through the wall—which means the company must come up with creative ways to mount the set and have it connect to the physical environment and circumstances.

The performance will be unveiled at the edge of the Tenderloin and Civic Center neighborhoods, where extremes of wealth and poverty collide and opera-goers and homeless people brush elbows. Flyaway Productions' performances are always free to the public, as they take place in the uncontested (but still not without its class demarcations) space of the street. Unlike the traditional spaces of theatre and dance, which have historically created safe and exclusive enclaves for audience contemplation, a Flyaway Productions piece overturns such conventions and welcomes the unexpected or even unsettling as an integral aspect of the overall spectacle.

"Performance is outside and free and doesn't ask anything of you," says Kreiter. "If you want to stop and watch, you can, and if you want to keep on walking, you can. At the same time, there is an aspect of our dance that is fantastical and imaginative—and it brings an experience of wonder and reverie to people who can't necessarily pay for it."

Kreiter notes that she and Flyaway Productions fall into a tradition of public art and performance in a city in which these things have thrived for quite a while, and she doesn't see this changing. Kreiter is also quick to mention the longstanding history of public performance that is part and parcel of the Tenderloin community. "There's a lot of performing that goes on here, and there is also a huge resistance to gentrification that the area is known for. This piece falls within both traditions."

Kreiter is also clear that while Flyaway Productions is helming a piece in the neighborhood, she is a guest in the community; thus, the company seeks to be respectful of the place in which it is performing and the people in that immediate environment. This process includes a residency for seven weeks above the street where the performance will take place; essentially, the company will create the piece on site, meaning the community will have an opportunity to see the project grow. Kreiter says that a certain amount of relationship building is a natural outgrowth of the creative process. "That's a magical experience for me as an artist and a citizen," she notes. "I get to relate to people in a completely different way than if I were a barrista or street cop. We are bringing a certain magic to the scene every day, and as people get to see it evolve, they naturally become part of the process...I have received some of my best critiques from passersby on the street. There is no preconceived bullshit in the lens through which they are perceiving the work and how they talk to me."

Of course, working in a nontraditional environment where the flow of street traffic may contribute to a viewing experience that is transient or intermittent is something that Kreiter takes under consideration. At the same time, her modus operandi is "creating the piece for someone who is willing and wanting to invest in a performance from start to finish. I realize I don't always get that—I may get people who take pictures on their iPhones and walk on. However, I'm going to deliver the best piece of art that I possibly can, and I won't water it down because we're in a public space."

On a more mundane level, whatever is happening in the audience cannot help but become a layer of the performance. For example, a fire truck that drives by may not necessarily enter the frame of the performance but it can still become part of the sonic landscape of the piece. "I cannot control what the audience experiences," says Kreiter, who notes that this model diverges from the conventional theatrical spectacle. "But this can actually be quite delightful."

There are also unique considerations that Kreiter and her colleagues must engage with—ones that affect the flexibility of the container around the performance. For one thing, sightlines and distance are a large concern. "The audience is pretty far away from us, and one section of this piece happens in the top third of the wall," explains Kreiter. "This affects the kinetic vocabulary I use...it's hard for me to make decisions until I actually see what is happening, which is why we like to work on site before the show." It also makes it more challenging to develop a sense of character, as the intimacy of facial expressions is largely absent, but Kreiter notes that this isn't entirely unique and similarly affects those who work in opera or other large spaces.

When it comes to aesthetic considerations, Kreiter also thinks about how people are going to interpret the dancers' flight. "Will it scare, delight, or intrigue? Will it expand them or make them feel limited?"

Kreiter will have the opportunity to receive direct feedback from her audience, as the company is hosting a series of curbside chats. She has spoken in the past about the importance of "meeting people where they are," given Flyaway Productions' interest in engaging with the community who inhabit the places where they perform. The curbside chats include a partnership with the San Francisco Unified School District and spectators will have a chance to ask questions and offer their insights post-performance.

"I HAVE RECEIVED SOME OF MY BEST CRITIQUES FROM PASSERSBY ON THE STREET."

—Jo Kreiter

The notion of creating dialogue on the streets isn't new to the company, and former Flyaway Productions shows have demonstrated that the act of claiming space is inherently political. "Something I've always noticed is that you don't often see groups of women being physical in a public space," says Kreiter. "To see dancers in a state of physical work in public is a wonderful reclamation...One of the things we do is bring a sense of safety and imagination to down-and-out places in the city that don't necessarily strike people as safe or imaginative. In the Tenderloin you are more likely to look down an alley and see a drug dealer than you are to see aerial dance. To me, what we are doing is a political act—to prioritize a positive imaginative process over an extended period of time."

When it comes to Kreiter's long-term vision with this new piece, she says, "I want homelessness to change, and I want us to reorganize our priorities so housing security is at the top of the list. It's insane that we tolerate people sleeping on the street. But I know these outcomes won't occur because of one little dance in one little neighborhood in September." Kreiter acknowledges that many urban dwellers suffer from compassion fatigue and desensitization, but if she can help to reignite some of that compassion in even a third of the audience that comes to see the performance, "we will have done something great."

Multiple Mary and Invisible Jane plays September 12-20. The show runs 30 minutes and takes place at 333 Golden Gate Ave, San Francisco. Tickets are free. For showtimes and more information, visit flyawayproductions.com.

Nirmala Nataraj is a Bay Area-based playwright, journalist and author.



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