

Being Blurred: Ralph Lemon Interviewed

by Ariel Osterweis Scott
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Ariel Osterweis Scott (AS): The last time I saw you was at a Miguel Gutierrez performance. I remember you said something provocative regarding an explicit performance art piece I hadn't seen: *Isn't anything sacred anymore?*

Ralph Lemon (RL): It's an old school point of view, right?

AS: Not necessarily. It could be very new school, in fact, since things come around. In terms of your new work for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, did they commission the piece?

RL: They're one of the presenters. It premieres at the Krannert Center in September. You know how it goes: you make the work, and who knows when it's finished? The director of the Krannert Mike Ross did a similar thing with *Come Home Charley Patton*: he gave us a lot of time to take the work out of its rehearsal phase and into a theater to really build it so we could have that container. He's adding a theatrical container. We had 16 days there to build it and bring it to life in a proscenium environment.

AS: Can you tell me a little bit about the title, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* You had told me before that this piece takes off from your Walter Carter interactions, so I wasn't sure if the title might have something to do with age, and being elderly and staying in the home.

RL: When I was making and researching *Come Home Charley Patton*, my daughter and I did memory workshops with kids in urban environments...I would beg you not to give away the story! The title has so many meanings. I've gotten so many compliments on it. Everyone has so many different interpretations of what it means, so it would be nice to kind of leave it at that.

AS: I won't share it. I've heard [your dramaturge] Katherine Profeta give her paper on the new work, her anti-spectacle paper. She claims that you're saying "no" to spectacle in this piece. Do you want to say more about that? Is that one of the driving issues behind the piece?

RL: That's Katherine's take as a dramaturge. She thinks very differently than I do, which is why we have such a good working relationship. I think for me it's more indeterminate. I think the movement part of the work is kind of a revolt against the way I know dance, and that revolt is healthy. It's a way of

leaving dance without leaving it. It's trying to destroy form and the remarkable physical practice I know of. Compositionally, it kind of choreographs itself. It's a work that's so beyond the dancers' bodies. It creates its own engine and its own calculus. They have to determine how to be in it or not be in it. In an interesting way, it makes it more a part of nature, the physical idea of a particular choreographer. I feel like we've created a container that has its own life. It's a very brutal and dangerous container because in order to create it, we had to amp it up physically where no one is really in control yet they have to say yes to it. It's a very wild work and kind of unwatchable, which is very satisfying to me because I can't look at it as a dance. It has this blur quality to it and, yet, it is somewhat repeatable and has a particular point of view. It's more emotional than sculptural, so far.

AS: In terms of the practical day-to-day rehearsal process of forming and manipulating the container, how do you create that wild atmosphere?

RL: Well, it came at the end of *Come Home Charley Patton*, which was the end of the nine-year *Geography Trilogy*. That was a very long moment of aesthetic and emotional research for me, so by the end of it, I was kind of done and it seemed to me, let's be done with the dancing too, which is kind of really holding all this together. Let's make a dance in this work that has no point of view in its energy. Of course after an hour and forty minutes, three minutes of this idea was all we could manage. Then four years later, I got everyone back together and said, "Let's begin from where we left off." They were all willing because it's not a company. It's a bunch of friends that are interested in what it is we're working on. They have their own lives and work and practices. I think the idea of this particular physical thing, this experiment, is really intriguing to all these bodies. We got back together and now instead of a three-minute work, we've got a twenty-minute work. It seemed impossible; it was a miracle. The discussions are very contentious because the work—it's nature, it's engine—the body doesn't want to work that way...No body wants to move that way because it's a physical research that's somewhat out of control, and that's nature, so there's a sense of not knowing what it is they are experiencing.

AS: You say out of control. In a way that makes me think of possession, but then when you say "nature," it makes me think of something external and environmental that's coming from the outside as opposed to being possessed from within.

RL: Yeah, both of those; it's not possession as we know possession or as it's romanticized. So, there are things they are working on as intelligent trained bodies, but we've exaggerated all of those ideas and concerns and experiments, and just turned up the volume. We've created an energetic physical language that's just indeterminate and has to keep going. Some of the principles are that it has to stay at this high level and one can't ebb and flow with it. You keep it turned up. So it's a blur for them experientially and a

blur for them emotionally. The body doesn't want to do it. There's not an element where they feel satisfied.

AS: Do they feel safe?

RL: They don't feel safe. They don't feel safe, they don't feel satisfied, and yet they know it's an important thing to be researched. They don't have a sense of doing it for the audience because it's so not about that. But they are put in an audience context, which is interesting and a little bit perverse. The whole nature of it is just so interesting to me.

AS: Do you have anything to say about audience expectation for black bodies, especially in concert dance?

RL: For this, we are black. But at least in our consciousness, that's as far as it goes, racially. With *Come Home Charley Patton* it was very much about race from particular points of view, but then by the end, I had sort of exhausted my own interest in that particular POV, as far as putting it on stage, in a dance. Now I feel like I have a bunch of black bodies moving very much beyond race. And, yeah, someone's going to look at it and see a bunch of black bodies. But what everyone is exploring is more about energy, about states of being, about the edge and how not to hurt oneself within the demands of what the work is calling for. These are very primal and very essential concerns that have very little to do with being black, although that's where it came from. In fact, that's what people will see. They will see black bodies, but compositionally the work is blurred. Does it matter that these are black bodies? But they are. So there's that nice contradiction, perhaps.

AS: Perhaps next year you will restage the piece with a non-black body?

RL: With my works, when they're done they're done, so there's no redoing them.

It's also very much about the moment. Not only are you seeing something that is kind of not there because it's moving so fast, but you're also not going to see it again, literally. You're not going to see it on another company. You're not going to see it restaged. This is it.

AS: I read an interview you did with Donna [Uchizono]. In it you say "I'm absolutely not moving," that you ask the dancers to serve as surrogates for your emotions, and that you put that on the table. But earlier in the interview, [Donna] quotes Meredith Monk saying that dancers are the cockroaches of the art world.

RL: That meant that we'll never go away, right?

AS: That we'll never go away, that we're the lowest on the hierarchy of...

RL: But I took that as a compliment.

AS: So you don't appear in the piece at all?

RL: Yeah. I move a little bit. I was exaggerating. But I'm not moving like they're moving.

AS: In terms of being surrogates, could you say a little more about that? How does that work?

RL: Grief and mourning are something beautiful and something we all hold. Maybe the translation of all this is grace. And I don't mean from a religious Judeo-Christian point of view, but that unspeakable, that unknowable state of being that holds all of it. It holds joy and beauty and love and grief and mourning and loss, without hierarchy.

AS: It brings up a basic question about the dancer-choreographer relationship. You could say that in the most classic sense, dancers have always been surrogates for the choreographer.

RL: Of course. I was a young waiter in New York when I first moved to the city, at a restaurant where I worked I met a few of the dancers [from Pina Bausch's company]. I had just seen *1980*, a beautiful piece, funny as hell. There was water; a beach onstage. A lovely bright work....I asked one of the company members, Dominique Mercy, "How did she make that work?" And Dominique said, "That was the piece we made right after Pina had lost her partner." Her partner was the stage designer of some of her most important work, in my opinion. He died of cancer. It was probably the early 80s. Dominique said, "That was the piece we made right after this man died. It was a piece we made to try and cheer Pina up." I remember hearing that as a young dancer, thinking, god, that is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard! I have an incredible community of collaborators who are really helping me through something. And at the same time, they found something inside of it that is their own that's worth working really hard at.

AS: In a sense, really they're working with their own emotions.

RL: Exactly.

AS: Do they discuss that in the process?

RL: Absolutely. We spent a good four years making *Come Home Charley Patton* and we went through enormous things to get to that place. So we're kind of bonded as researchers and it's just the next phase. We're not a company, so it's really important that it's not just people who get paid by Cross Performance, Inc. I called them to get back together to research.

AS: What are some of the things the dancers do in their "other" lives?

RL: Darrell [Jones] is a fulltime professor at Columbia College Chicago. Gesel [Mason] teaches at the University of Maryland and does her own work. David Thomson is a New Yorker and does his own work. Okwui [Okpokwasili] is an actress and does plays and movies. Omagbitse [Omagbemi] has a yoga practice and performs with lots of people in New York City and Djédjé Djédjé [Gervais] lives in Baltimore (an incredible dance artist and teacher who I think also drives a truck). Everyone has enormous, very mature lives.

AS: Is there a sense of taming or repression with the idea of grace? Or is it more a sense that over time a kind of grace emerges as you work things out physically and choreographically and emotionally?

RL: Well, you know, from a biblical point of view, grace is that thing that can only come from God. And the way I like to translate that is something that can only come from this other thing that we don't know. And I think maybe in the way I refer to it we get into discussing beauty from a profound level. Or elegance. It's like equipoise, this balance of all that we are. It's a quality, state of being, the whole of all the things that we are. And in that holding all the things that we are, in that balance of oneself, there is a kind of completeness. That's how I think I would like to think of grace.

AS: Just switching gears a bit, I know you were at Stanford for a semester. What is your relationship to academia? How did that collaboration or invitation come about? Do you find it productive for your creative work to be in an academic environment? Do you find it stifling?

RL: What I like about these academic situations, particularly environments like Stanford, is that it's an opportunity for me to go and exercise my brain. There's this body practice I have, then there's the practice of my drawing and my writing, but the Stanford experience was wonderful because the students were brilliant and physically playful. They were intellectually challenging and I had to exercise how I was speaking about things, and had to articulate my ideas in a different way, which was useful.

AS: Did you do practice with them?

RL: Yeah, it was great because the students I worked with were not professional dancers. They like to move and they were really smart. I couldn't ask for something more perfect than someone who enjoys moving and is really smart. They're going to come up with things that are very surprising. Working with a trained body, there's going to be something more predictable.

AS: Did you guys make a piece? Or, did you hold workshops?

RL: We had a workshop and put together an art installation. In one of the classes they made handmade books. For me it's important to go into these situations without the expectations of dancing. It's like, ok, yeah, let's move

and now let's make things. Let's take photographs and let's write. And let's make books. It's all the things that I do. I don't have a hierarchy. I think they all are addressing the locus of our individual experience and there are many ways about going about that locus (or to dance around it), and movement is one of them. But movement relates to all these other things, so let's explore that.

AS: I'm sure you've noticed in performance studies this whole idea of practice-as-research (as described in the academy). I see a lot of your work as true practice-as-research. Have you seen successful practice-as-research exercises or projects in an academic environment?

RL: Not yet. But I think it's coming. In academic environments there's a hierarchy. No matter what they say, it's more about the scholarly practice. In Europe it's different. In Europe some of the academics end up performing, making work, right? So, they stop being academics. I think it's really hard to do both.

AS: It is.

RL: My life feels very schizophrenic, but I've found a rhythm to it. I get really overwhelmed because there's so much going on. All of it starts to stretch. I think in academia (at least in America) it's a matter of time. Eventually there's going to be some shifting in the nature of what it is that will be good. I think it's a good thing to try even if it's not working. I think it's essential. I think one can't really write a book about something important or talk about something important without having some relationship to its practice.

AS: I fully agree.

RL: And so, what does that mean? It is the next conundrum.

AS: I don't know if you know the work of the choreographer Wayne McGregor. He was working on some sort of collaborative research project at Cambridge and it didn't require him to write a thing because they truly respected his craft of choreography. And this is in the sciences as well as the humanities.

RL: We need more of that here. It just gives more relevance to work people are making, especially if it's good work. There's a certain prejudice that I think we all hold, in the practice world and in the academic world. Let's just get over it and look at the work.

AS: And I think the problem is the problem of time. To get a chapter done, you do have to lock yourself in the house all day and to get a piece done, you do have to lock yourself in the studio all day, in a sense.

RL: No, it's true.

AS: I wonder myself if it's possible to really, really do both.

RL: Again, I think it's just how you prioritize and are able to fluidly move between things, and I think we're coming into a culture where—maybe I'm dreaming—but where more is available, just in the psychic sense.

AS: I feel that way too, but then I turn on the TV and see *So You Think You Can Dance*? So, is your project something that works against the popularization of dance? I mean, we don't want to work against that...

RL: No...

AS: But at the same time, it's hard because a lot of postmodern dance is still so exclusive in terms of audiences. Do you feel like the classes and workshops you do are a way to slowly become less exclusive, or do you just accept that there are only limited audiences for certain art forms and certain genres?

RL: Yeah, and I think my classes are extremely exclusive, but I don't go in with a particular kind of hubris about its being elitist. I'm just interested in these things and I'm passionate about them and they feel very human and profound to me. So in that sense they feel universal, but it doesn't feel particularly popular. It doesn't feel like anything that's going to be interesting on TV.

AS: You never know.

RL: If something turns me on, I doubt it would have an audience. Truly. And I don't feel proud of that, it's just sort of the way it is. I feel like the work I'm really interested in is going to have a small audience. Maybe that's why it's interesting to me. And I don't feel like it's something I want to keep away from a large audience. It feels like a larger audience is.... I mean, c'mon, I'm making a dance that's a blur for twenty minutes...with no music!

AS: There's no music?

RL: This piece is so stripped down. And I keep trying to fuck it up by trying to add things to it and it just keeps saying "No." It just keeps saying "No!"

AS: And so is it barefoot?

RL: Yeah, so far. The dancers want to wear shoes because it would be healthier for them.

AS: Is there a lot of huffing and puffing though? There must be a lot of sound.

RL: Yeah, there's lots huffing and puffing, but I've tried to have them tone that part down so they don't indulge by making lots of sounds, which had come up in some of the research as a way to get through it. I thought, well, just try not to be so indulgent with that element, to see what happens. It's a strange piece with a strange research.

AS: Maybe the last question I'll ask you is about the film influence, *Solaris*.

RL: There's a new film I've made that I'm screening, made with my collaborators in Mississippi, Walter and Edna. It's connected to the performance and to *Solaris*. There's a whole exhibition of the work I've done in Mississippi that will be in the YBCA gallery.

AS: I think I'm going to catch your performance in Seattle.

RL: Oh cool.

AS: Will it also have the installations?

RL: No, it will have the meditation: Part Four.

AS: And will it have the proscenium work?

RL: It will have the proscenium. It won't have the exhibition part. Only YBCA will have that. It's quite a big deal. I'm very excited. It gives me an opportunity to show all the different parts of this thing. It's very complex. It's very lovely.

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts presents a new interdisciplinary performance work by Ralph Lemon: *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?*

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