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WINKING AT JESUS: THE DANCING MASCULINITIES OF CAMPO AND TRAJAL HARRELL

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by Ariel Osterweis

Since the 1960s, contemporary dance has been burdened by two predominant taboos: religion and emotion. Heartily challenging these taboos today are choreographers Pieter Ampe and Guilherme Garrido (the duo comprising Campo) and Trajal Harrell. During one evening here at PICA's TBA13 festival, I saw Campo's duet *Still Standing You* immediately followed by Harrell's *Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (Made to Measure)/Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (M2M)*. Both casts are comprised entirely of men, unabashedly yet jaggedly burrowing into fraught spaces of becoming, the kinds of liminalities that reek of cohabitated dorm rooms, dried cum, and the sweat of dresses being aired out after a hard night at the ball.



Pieter Amp and Guiherme Garrido
Still Standing You
Photo by Phile Deprez
Courtesy of Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

Entering the theater, the audience happens upon *Still Standing You*'s Ampe lying on his back onstage, his feet raised perpendicularly, with Garrido seated atop. Although Garrido could tumble to the ground at any moment, he addresses the audience with small talk (while wobbling a bit on the temporary seating of Ampe's legs), asking about Portland's rumored "vegan strip club" and its label of the "Rip City." As Garrido nurtures this playful rapport with the audience, one detects Ampe's fatiguing support, the increasing discomfort of the seemingly impossible task with which he has been charged. Herein lies the crux of the piece's aesthetic: nonchalance amidst precariousness. Still chatting up the audience, Garrido clarifies, "What you're about to see now is a contemporary dance show" and then instructs the crowd to utter in unison, "Pieter Ampe, we love you!" Encouraging a shift in tone while stretching his arms in front of him in an exaggeratedly stiff, straight parallel position, Garrido states, "Here we go. Contemporary style now. Here we go. Serious."

What ensues in *Still Standing You* is the kind of dangerous play you find in many a boy-filled household. I say "household" as opposed to "playground" because Ampe and Garrido's passages of roughhousing are punctuated by intimate moments of care and experimentation, that of two brothers who rip their clothes off like superheroes, one-up each other in absurd penis-slapping games, and tenderly nudge each other to assuage the brutality of boyhood. Here, the wild growls of lions and loud thuds of crashing robots are tamed by the domesticity of the barely detectable pitter-patter of two fingers catching up to each other across a patch of floor to indicate walking. Such snippets of gestural storytelling appear in sharp contrast to the magnitude of Ampe and Garrido's exaggerated risks and crashes. Finally, after an inventive pas de deux of penis-grabbing, foreskin-twisting, and Pilobolus-like body-pretzeling, the roles of support reverse and Garrido takes Ampe in his arms, generating an iconographic image reminiscent of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus in the pieta. In Campo fashion, the hold is precarious, and Ampe could slip out of Garrido's arms at any moment.

Whereas Campo evokes the Bataillan incommensurability of the four-legged, sensory creature and the rational, upright human, Harrell depends on our recognition of the ubiquitous postmodern players known to us as supermodels. Moreover, in *M2M*, Harrell experiments with layers upon layers of performance, in which contemporary white dancers elicit black and Latino voguers of all genders from ballroom culture who, in turn, try on the hyper-feminized looks of fashion magazines. Throughout his series, *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church*, Harrell has taken up gendered and racial performance, in which one gender performs another gender performing another gender, and so on. In doing so, he poses questions such as, what would happen if a voguer from Harlem's 1963 ballroom scene went down to the Judson Church to hang out with the early postmoderns? *M2M* reverses the series' original provocation, exploring the imaginative limits and possibilities of an early postmodern (dancer) finding himself in the balls of Harlem. Drawing from the colloquial use of "giving church" found in ballroom culture—already a mix of high fashion posturing and the

church-inspired lyrics of the deep house music that drives many a voguing competition—Harrell takes his audience to church with *M2M*. Needless to say, the aesthetic of “difficulty” central to Judson-inspired work tends to obscure the church service structure of *M2M* for the average viewer (at least according to my own surveying of audience members after the performance).



Ondrej Vidlar, Thibault Lac, and Trajal Harrell

Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (Made to Measure)/Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (M2M)

Photo by Chelsea Petrakis

Courtesy of Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

Like *Still Standing You*, *M2M* opens with audience address. The irrepressibly handsome Thibault Lac, awkwardly lanky and modishly coiffed enough to be—or at least stand in for—a Rick Owens model, coyly tells the audience in a French accent, “What you see couldn’t have been performed at Judson or the balls. I’ll ask you to forget this happened.” Lac suggests that the cast is merely trying out a possible beginning for the piece that they will likely discard. Yet, at no point is the culmination of the trial overture indicated, leading the audience to believe that the entire piece is a potentiality in itself, never etched into the tablets of history. Lac leaves the stage and the audience is met with the heavy bass and driving beat of a house remix of Adele’s impassioned (and widely played) “Fire to the Rain.” Unacceptable as it will seem to my academic cohort, I have lost nights upon nights of productivity to the emotional pull of this very song. An uncanny mnemonic, to hear it resonating throughout the theater, in public, is to sense a coalescence of queer community and mainstream cheapness. On the one hand, the song creates an affective commonality: conjuring a club, “Fire to the Rain” played as a danceless dance song points to dance’s *potential*. (My other favorite danceless opening to a dance piece done to dance music is that of Jerome Bel’s *The Show Must Go On*, in which, in a similar postdramatic mode, the lights take the entire length of the song “Let the Sunshine In” to rise on an otherwise empty stage.) Aside from an electric fan sitting on the floor, the stage is empty at this point. Finally the entire cast of three (Harrell, Lac, and Ondrej Vidlar) enters, clad in adjustable long black dresses by Complex Geometries, and sits down on wooden chairs. Seated upstage of Lac, Harrell immediately dons the pained expression of a woman wailing in church (a nod to Alvin Ailey’s iconic *Revelations*?). Because the audience is not privy to any emotional build-up that could have led to this moment of climax, Harrell’s expression reads as either a droplet of melodrama or grief stripped of context. Film scholar Linda Williams refers to melodrama as a “body genre,” as a film genre (or “mode”) that is excessive to the degree that its affect spills over beyond legibility (despite its recognizability).

Ever challenging established historical narratives (or the way they get “written”), Harrell has a knack for joggling the audience’s sense of temporality in two distinct ways, namely, through his strategic use of pop music and by deploying facial expressions of grief that function as signifiers. Harrell and company have explicitly stated that they are not voguers and that they do not completely embody its technique. Thus, pseudo-voguing here is a signifier of virtuosic dancing (but not its complete fulfillment). As such, Harrell

points to the historical imperative for African American dancers to be virtuosic, to “be fierce.” Harrell is astute in drawing our attention—however opaquely—to the way melodrama and sincere emotion are easily conflated. In doing so, he arrives at the crux of ballroom culture (where voguing emerged), namely, its preoccupation with “realness,” the ability to pass such that one cannot be “read” (called out for faking it). In focusing on resemblance over reality, Harrell utters, “Sounds like the souls of black folks.” His fellow performers are white, dancing to a soulful soundtrack of house, disco, and hip-hop. Despite racialized and gendered ambivalence, however, *M2M* concerns itself with queer belonging, evoked at one point by the longing of Antony and the Johnson’s lyrics, “I need another place...will there be peace? I need another world, a place where I can go.” The dancers alternate between pious gestures of prayer (while holding phallic microphones) and frantic freestyle dancing that lies somewhere between runway strutting, voguing, and imitations of hip-hop. Evoking the demands of ballroom culture typically uttered by voguing MCs, Harrell, Lac, and Vidlar repeatedly say, “Mama said don’t stop the dance” as a command at times and a lullaby at others. In self-reflexive fashion, the dancers also state, “Contemporary dance is over.” However, in more play with colloquialisms, they could be saying “Contemporary dance is *ovah*,” which is a huge compliment, meaning “fabulous!” Perhaps one of the most hauntingly ambivalent commands Harrell preaches to the dancers during *M2M* is “Don’t think; work.” Which, of course, could be “Don’t think; *werq*,” and to *werq* is to fulfill ballroom’s realness, to be an utterly convincing performer. Nevertheless, the danger Harrell points to is our culture’s expectations for (and assumptions of) black performance as unthinking labor, far from the self-reflexive, critical terrain of Harrell’s imaginings. What does it mean, though, that the dancer “working” the hardest is Lac, flinging his limbs every which way in a sinewy, breakneck solo that tries to defy stereotypes of white boys and rhythm? In following the command to work/*werq*, the dancers emerge from *M2M* covered in sweat. Things wind down and fire returns via a lonely plea into the mic: “Won’t you wet my fire with your love, baby?” “M2M” could also stand for man-to-man. Both Campo and Harrell remind us that, underlying boys’ huge capacity for play is the threat of violence: what risks will you take for (and to perform) your identity, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise? (Is Jesus watching? And, who’s there to support you when he fails?)

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Ariel Osterweis is Assistant Professor of Dance at Wayne State University (Detroit, MI). She earned her Ph.D. in Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and B.A. in Anthropology at Columbia University. At work on her first book, which theorizes virtuosity, race, and sexuality in the dance career of Desmond Richardson, Osterweis also researches contemporary African dance and the disavowal of virtuosity in feminist and transgender live art and performance. Publications appear in *Dance Research Journal*, *Women and Performance*, *e-misférica*, *Theatre Survey*, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, and more. She danced professionally with Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Mia Michaels, and Heidi Latsky, choreographers, and is dramaturg for choreographer John Jasperse and performance artist Narcissister. Osterweis is currently living in New York City.

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