

Pretending to Be Something, Now Coming from Nothing:

A Project with Agulhas Theatre Works

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At the beginning of each rehearsal day, ATW and I had conversations about skin color, power, government, money, fun, and pain. I saw that the discharge process¹ could be both useful in this setting and used as a resource and catalyst towards creating dance work. What might the outcome be if we use the discharge process as an impetus for and the basis of choreographic work?

I asked Gladys and David if they had ever pretended and if so, why. Out came an extensive list of experiences of people labeling us and the ways in which we have been forced to operate within the boundaries created to, often times forcefully, keep us in place. Each one of us experienced having been seen as, gazed upon, looked at, and stared at negatively by “the Other.” More often than not, “the Other” was not part of our demographic group, but in some cases, “the Other” was. David expressed that it felt “strangling and stunning,” and said, “I don’t think that the color barrier will come to an end.”

This gaze and perception now became the premise for working on the piece. We improvised dance and movement on the subject of oppression, colonization, disability, sexism, and access to resource. We explored incorporating acts of discharge -- dancing whilst shaking, trembling, and flicking. We investigated the different manners in which our bodies and minds have been hurt and explored releasing the places in our bodies where hurt is stored.

I asked the dancers what they wanted to dance about. Gladys said, “This is not a Black thing. I want this to be about professional artists performing and sharing our experiences with each other to the audience.” David responded with, “The issues are debatable. We are all philosophies in our own way. I am the spirit and I draw the line. You can try by becoming ignorant. I don’t think there is anything that is nothing.” Gladys said, “Stillness. Quietness. Peace.” I requested that each of us create a solo for ourselves, a sort of map or illustration of our lives up to this point.

A duet was created for each pair of dancers (David/Gladys, Adam/David, Adam/Gladys in that order) with solos separating each duet (Gladys, Adam, David in that order). In the memorable duet co-choreographed by David and myself entitled “Amends,” as co-choreographers, our aim here was to illustrate equality across both difference and color lines, as well as across ability and resource. David and I are more the same than we are different. Adrienne Sichel, dance critic and writer for the Johannesburg Star watched one of the rehearsals in progress and writes:

At that, and several other moments, they were equal, the only test being their individual, then combined, physical and spiritual strengths in choreography which is about "exploring liberation through the body's attachment to histories of and connections to suffering"...He [McKinney] is particularly pleased that he gets to partner David Fumbatha and lift him. As it turns out, they lift each other.

¹ See www.rc.org.

In rehearsal, the questions arose, “What if we were given the opportunity to come from nothing? What if we were “gazed upon” as the human qualities of being completely intelligent, cooperative, zestful, loving, and good?” We decided to call the piece “Pretending to be Something, Now Coming from Nothing: Exploring the Body’s Attachments to and Histories of Suffering.” Given the usefulness of discharge and the “improvising off certain phrases, the performers produced a wealth of material, true to the title, something from nothing (Sichel).”

The performance space (donated by MuseuMAfricA) was such that the audience (as “witness” to the healing) was forced to move from space to space to be able to view the action. In the post-performance discussion, audience members asked questions about the piece, the rehearsal process, etc. We noticed that audience members were “discharging” about the feelings that arose while viewing the dance. One member talked about how he was annoyed that he did not know where to look next and became confused. He mentioned that we, the artists, should accommodate audience members. Another member replied that often times, society makes it quite difficult for the disabled to gain access to “see” or “be seen” and the feeling of having to negotiate space was not a new one for him. Gladys, David, and I spent a few minutes afterward to finalize our experience. All three of us asserted that we felt more relaxed, released, and at peace. A quietness, a stillness overcame us where we could just “be.”

I found that the use of the discharge process and personal narratives with David Fumbatha and Gladys Agulhas of Agulhas Theatre Works catalyzed the creative choreographic process. The releasing of pain and discharge and the effects of “the gaze” on persons targeted by systems of oppression were used to create work where it became confirmable in the eyes of the listener/viewer/witness/audience. As an artist, the discharge process catalyzed the creative process and freed space in our psyches to create profound work.

Kliptown, South Africa, is best known for its connection to the Freedom Charter, a declaration of democracy organized by the Congress Alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), the Coloured People’s Congress (CPC), the South African Congress of Democrats (SACD), and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC). June 26, 1955 marked the first time in South African history that thousands of people of mixed heritages and backgrounds convened to announce, “The People Shall Govern!” The Freedom Charter is the basis for South Africa’s constitution signed in 1994.

Gladys Agulhas and her husband gave me a tour of Kliptown. As we crested a hill -- past the Black Label Beer billboards, past the Walter Sisulu memorial, past the old tires, past the building where Nelson Mandela hid (now the yellow-painted “Nancy’s Florist”), past the colorful mural of Coloured people of all colours, and past the caged chickens ready to be sold -- we came upon an eerie three-story stone skeleton of a building. Two structures lie adjacent to the Skeleton, which stands even taller than the monument to Walter Sisulu. It seemed as if the Skeleton was waiting for us there to be discovered. Not knowing what the building was, I turned to Gladys and excitedly proclaimed, “We must dance there. Let’s do something there.” A few days later, I connected with filmmaker Khubu Meth and asked her to film our outing. The following Saturday, I drove with Khubu and met dancer David Fumbatha and Gladys at the Skeleton. I hadn’t

remembered how massive and deflated it seemed. Khubu began to film me sweeping debris, glass, and ash from its floor. She turned to me and asked,

“Do you know what this building is used for?”

“I heard it was an old movie house.”

“This building is a drug house.”

I looked closer at the layers of peeling paint on its walls and saw painted marijuana leaves and the phrases --“I’M HAPPIER DOPE HIGH THAN WHEN I DON’T GIVE A FUCK,” “THUG LIFE,” “ALONE,” “DON’T DISTURB THE SMOKERS,” and “THE T.B.S. GANG.” These words speak from each coating of plaster, each brick, and each level. I saw young men rolling joints from newsprint waiting to get inside the Skeleton to partake. I understood that, in the face of power, this was their form of resistance, where, seemingly, there was and continues to be no room for freedom.

On this crisp Saturday morning, my feet somehow felt warm from the Skeleton’s bones and, after sweeping its back, I removed my shoes and, along with Gladys and David, began to dance in and on the remaining body of this historical structure. In the chapter entitled “External Boundaries,” of her book *Purity and Danger*, British anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries, which are threaded or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures (115).” The Skeleton is a microcosm of the persistent racism that are lived experiences for South African populations and is a symbol of the pervasiveness of the institution of oppression. Though Apartheid ended in 1994, the “bounded system” continues to affect people’s daily lives. The Skeleton’s body is not only complex in its history, but also in its architecture. Photographs taken from different vantage points see the Skeleton’s appearance as both enormous and immobile and frail and in poor health. From each hole that used to be a window, the building sees every corner of Kliptown. The structures that lay adjacent to the Skeleton are neither as dilapidated nor as defaced. Is it ironic that this building in particular, where people signed the Freedom Charter, was covered in people’s messages, thoughts, and pain? Is it ironic that the Skeleton is now a place where people come to numb, perhaps to forget the ways in which they are systemically oppressed? The graffiti gives the Skeleton a form, a shape, a face. Truly, the Skeleton body is “a symbol of society (155).”

A man with a grill sold snacks to residents who walked adjacent to the building, staring at the American sweeping the dilapidated, seemingly “useless” building. Gladys, David, and I continued to improvise as more and more community members came to see what we were doing. After one hour, a crowd of people surrounded the building. Gladys and I invited community members to dance atop the Skeleton and, with us, take part in contact improvisational exercises. Young people from the age of 4 and young men aged 14 to 20, strutted up the staircase where many of them may have graffitied their names, to join in as a collective group. There was no choreography and no teaching. There was only what came from participants. We, as a community, reclaimed the space, discovered movement and reached across language and cultural difference to rediscover ourselves and each other. During the dance, no drugs were used.

I could literally see myself in the faces of the people of Kliptown (I was asked several times if I was from there). I had never seen such a large number of identified or identifying mixed heritage people in my life. Experiencing this community was inspiring and exciting, saddening and enraging. Was it my objectifying American gaze tugging at

my heartstrings spinning lore of an AIDS-ridden South Africa that made feel this way? Maybe it was my idea of "Mother Africa" that comes with identifying (or being identified) as a Black American in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Maybe people just connect independent of culture, ethnicity, or language.

This impromptu, improvisational community-wide site-specific dance reclaimed the Skeleton, its body, its own history, while remembering South African history. The Skeleton danced with us under our feet and at our hands on its façade. Regardless of ability or heritage, age or language, the effect here was invented and reinvented in the lives of participants and the greater community.

I edited the footage filmed by Khubu Meth and used it as a backdrop for the piece we co-choreographed "Pretending to be Something, Now Coming from Nothing."

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