

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kenneth Koo

Variation on a Body-Slam

by **E. Wallis Cain Carbonell**

"There is a version of this where you all have already done the work," Clayton Lee announces to a full house who is already in love with him (he doled out beers to everyone during the pre-show) at FringeArts. In fact, the charming, self-described Gaysian performance artist has a seemingly infinite number of variations during his mostly solo show, which harkens back to his childhood obsession with professional wrestler Bill Goldberg. For instance, there is a version where a philanthropist has paid \$20,000 to have Goldberg himself jack-hammer Lee onstage in all his bandaged, bald, white, muscly glory. He asks us if anybody wants to subsidize this dream.

There is a version of this review where I lead with, "What does it feel like to be f\$%&d so long by white supremacy that you start to like it?," one of Lee's numerous questions to the crowd, and point out the gaping distance between the experiences of most of the ticket-buyers and those of Lee and wonder why there was more laughter than tears.

There is a version where I say that this genius performance art piece was "main character syndrome" at its best, and yet another where I liken Lee's brilliance to that of Julian Fellowes, creator of *Downton Abbey*, in that he creates provocative mysteries of his own life and loves, preparing us for the next episode all the while romancing us with his self-aware raw audacity.

Today, I have chosen the Philly version, the brotherly love one, featuring the bedazzled, dripping, hog-tied tenderness of Lee's offering. All of his romantic partners have had a resemblance to wrestler Bill Goldberg and he explores this oftentimes unhealthy obsession through a variety of lenses, including live internet-stalking and being slammed by local wrestlers/performers while a quartet of Opera Philadelphia singers doubling as stakes of the faux wrestling ring perform an acapella version of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* which morphs into, "Nobody does it better... Baby you're the best."

As the story goes, Bach's *Variations* came to be when an insomniac Count invited Bach over to coach his personal musician, Goldberg,

on playing music which helped the Count to sleep. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were composed to instill calm and Lee's variations of the same name somehow achieved a similar effect in that they are an ongoing attempt to process, if not heal the wounds of desire through the powerful imagery of one beautifully unfiltered individual.

[Goldberg Variations](#), Philadelphia Fringe Festival, FringeArts, Philadelphia, PA, September 12.

Homepage Image Description: *A male presenting figure is laying , hogtied and topless on the black stage floor. Muscly, oiled, topless, bald white men strut past him in the space.*

Article Page Image Description: *An Asian, male-presenting figure wearing black, lounges on plush white sheets, smiling as he frames his face with his hands.*

By E. Wallis Cain Carbonell

September 16, 2025