

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Antoine Tempé

Two Looks, from Twenty

by Megan Bridge and Greg Holt

TD writer Megan Bridge sat down for a screen-to-screen “chat” with colleague Gregory Holt about Trajal Harrell’s presentation of two versions (XS and Antigone Sr./L) of his work Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church. The work exists in several different iterations, ranging from XS, a solo performed by Harrell (referred to below as TH), to Antigone Sr./L, with a five-member cast, and even including a made-to-measure size, or M2M. The series takes on the same starting proposition in each version: “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?” We take on Harrell’s work as a proposal, a provocation, a catalyst for emergent thought and nonlinear conversation.

Megan Bridge: Since I only saw XS, and you saw both L and XS, can you start with a description of your experience at the L show?

Gregory Holt: For me, it was a little bit of a roller coaster, or a giant wheel turning, dredging through some low places, tragic places--and pulling through. The most moving sections for me in both works, XS and L, were when TH made use of near total darkness, forefronting a ghostly, airy presence, and asking for delicacy in viewership. This near darkness asked me if we can ever actually see each other in performance. Making art seems to require a faith that we *can* see each other, but this faith is also continually belied by the persistence of white privileging and the occlusion of black artistic output.

When TH shouted a list of global wealth and power centers (“we’ve been to Paris, we’ve been to Berlin, we’ve been to New York”), he incorporated performing credentials into the work, which both satirized those credentials and also highlighted for me a continual suspicion of this dance’s legitimacy within those centers. In other conversations about his work, I’ve heard the observation that, as TH engages in culturally privileged performance productions, he should more visibly reference his sources with regard to the voguing world.

TH claimed a soft and shifting approach to identity, among his characters and in terms of his stated speculative intertwining of histories; then I have to ask why all his performers were sleek, light-skinned, already highly desirable in the dance world? ([Alistair Macaulay](#) was hot for them). Accident? The proposed fiction of a non-appropriative alternaverse often felt like a repetition of what we know too well.

MB: The harsh realities of production make it almost impossible to avoid “credentializing” when framing one’s work. Movement itself is a marker for success, and immobility is stigmatized, or equated with invisibility: not getting “out” to one of those geographic validators (Paris! Berlin! New York!), or at least out of one’s place of origin, tends to marginalize one’s artistic work at home, too. I’m speaking from my perspective as an artist who tries to tour as much as possible for this reason. But of course this conversation about mobility could easily be transposed to the realities of ableism, as well: people who are disabled, and less mobile because of that, tend to also be far less visible in our culture.

GH: There was a long fashion show in *Antigone Sr./L* that rode an edge between ridiculous and real, and, for me, brought into focus fault lines of class and appropriation in the room (not sparing TH himself). It was fascinating to see the use of several recurring clothing items, donned in preposterous ways (shirts on legs, pants rolled into elaborate headresses)—yet, through the insistence and presence of the performers, suddenly not, suddenly almost fashionable, if only our social agreements would shift.

Overall, the piece was a moving and personal tribute to TH’s stated influences and much more, tempered with a hefty dose of vulnerability and risk. At first, the element of spectacle was merely appealing, but through an ongoing distortion of voice, body, and costume over two and a half hours, TH’s unique vocabulary and expression took over.

All of this world-creation is done in the service of revisiting the classic Greek tragedy *Antigone*. In yet another collision of cultural heritage, TH picks apart this story through critical performative interventions. The enacting of the story is tangled and inevitable; action is portrayed through a speaking of what deeds have occurred without representing them directly, but nonetheless driving the collapse and destruction of the House (an elision of the term House in the ballroom scene and the House of Thebes in *Antigone*). Many times, the performers identify themselves as “already dead.” In the play, Antigone is killed for mourning her unmournable brother, traitor to Thebes. In the performance, TH takes on the role of Antigone, but I’m also interested in the traitor Polynices. What are the betrayals in the House of Harrell? How do we mourn for them?

MB: Interesting about TH’s project are all the frameworks that it invokes or speaks to. I think it’s good to give ourselves permission to speak about the work outside of its racial identity (and even its gender identity), which I think TH would encourage. At the beginning of the XS show, TH passed out a packet of reading material (“This is meant to be read!” he told us) that included an article by performance theorist Peggy Phelan on Jennie Livingston’s film from 1991, *Paris Is Burning*. But also in the packet was an image (badly photocopied) of the back cover of a book that’s been on my reading list for a while, [How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness](#). The book summary starts off by saying “Work by black artists today is almost uniformly understood in terms of its ‘blackness,’ with audiences often expecting or requiring it to ‘represent’ the race.” The author, Darby English, attempts to show “how severely such expectations limit the scope of our knowledge about this work and how different it looks when approached on its own terms.” In XS, TH talked about “ocularity” and the visuality of the work. His inclusion of the *How to See a Work* text definitely speaks to this. What is visible in a culture? How does the way we see something change its meaning?

There are so many other nested frames—voguing and the gay black culture around the balls in New York in the eighties mashed up with Judson, the downtown dance scene of the sixties. So those are the explicit frames that we get, just from the title. This makes me think about something that’s been confusing me from the get-go: there’s a time displacement here. Judson was downtown New York in the sixties, but *Paris is Burning* (the film anyway, and, from my admittedly limited perspective, the balls as well) are from the eighties. But TH’s program note talks about these as “parallel historical traditions.” Can you shed any light on this?

GH: The phrase “Paris is Burning” refers within the film of the same title to an epic ball, but by now this phrase is thoroughly tethered to the film itself. So TH’s title refers not so much to voguing from the eighties as to an ethnographic documentary film about voguing from

the eighties. It's already about appropriation.

Voguing makes use of a dance structure that can be traced through African American forms back to the nineteenth-century cakewalk (which was appropriated by blackface minstrel shows and then became a popular white social dance). The structure and format of the dance is pretty consistent (judged competition, praise from spectators, walking/posing etc). I don't know when the contemporary vocabulary of voguing itself emerged, but I didn't see TH make heavy use of that specific vocabulary, though it does appear. (These balls have many events and categories for competition). TH draws on the structure of the walks, the MC, the language, and general affect of the ballroom scene.

There's a kind of formalism at work here: voguing relative to class privilege and celebrity culture, drag relative to gender—taking an image and re-adopting it element by element also draws attention to that image as a construct. You see the forms and formulas that go into the manufacture and performativity of identity. Voguing takes poses and forms as potential dances, potential movements, bringing to light the manufactured and remanufactured nature of those positions. Here's the question of visibility again.

MB: Yes, visibility, ocularity, and how the balls were so much about *looking* a certain way, about spectacle, about passing. And Judson was (or at least claimed to be) so anti-spectacle, trying to strip away, trying to get to something else.

GH: Many of the Judson artists had a bare aesthetic that served to keep attention on the form of the performance rather than on technical displays or narratives. This stripped-down style was very present in XS, but the lush aesthetic of TH's *L* show contrasted that.

MB: I love the relationship between the formalism of the two forms, voguing and postmodernism. At the balls, when the performers dismantled images from mainstream culture and revealed those images as constructs, this unveiling contained an inherent critique. I think Judson was doing this, too, but their critique was less nuanced, more “straight,” excuse the pun! I mean, Yvonne Rainer's “No Manifesto” was taking all of this on and rejecting it, rather than reifying it.

GH: I'd like to talk about misrecognition in the Phelan article included at the XS show. Phelan talks about a dual nature of misrecognition and truth. She says that misrecognition supports the impulse to fetishize and to transform the unknown, but that it also contains an erotic and affective power—the threat and joy of self-shattering. I think I spent the first part of TH's *L* piece refusing to trust his historical fiction. However, later there was a moment where we were brought to our feet, to become dancing participants. I experienced this moment as a break, an eruption of energy, and a recentering of my sense of myself in my own physical body. This relocated the threat of misrecognition for me internally, to how I see and cannot see myself, and prompted the feeling that while I'm looking at this performance moment, the performance is also looking at me, misrecognizing. However, I could be critical of my own ‘safety’ within this erotics—knowing that the pleasure of letting myself be dissolved for a moment is also reliant on my return to my body, my upcoming exit from the theater.

MB: Your experience of that moment when the performance shifted for you, when the threat of misrecognition changed, brings me back to thinking about the excerpt from *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. I think the role of scholarship and discourse is integral to art, but when we don't allow art to do the work of being art, nothing gets dislodged. The experiential part is confusing and tangled and ephemeral and and and ... it's exactly what keeps us coming back to the theater, to the studio. It's what starts these conversations in the first place. When you left the theater after having the pleasure of letting yourself be dissolved for the moment, you returned to the relative ‘safety’ of your own body. But that is a body also marked by all sorts of stuff that you carry around. History, trauma ... like art, none of it's truly “safe.”

Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (XS), and *Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (L)*, Trajal Harrell, FringeArts, September 9, 12 & 13.

By Megan Bridge
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