

THE RE-EMANCIPATION OF SOCIAL DANCE

PRESHOW

The audience enters a loud, bumping, house party. Music lays from all over the space. It is dimly lit.

The room is set up almost like an amphitheater, couches, cushions, carpets create the seating environment, and a U-shape of “living rooms” create the perimeter.

THE COMPANY welcomes each guest. Invites them to walk around, hang out, have a drink, or snack, and enjoy the Party.

This lasts until the room is full.

LIGHTS FADE

RAJA (V.O)

Something about Freedom keeps coming up. We live in a free country. Are we free people? What does it mean to be Emancipated? What does it mean to Re-Emancipate oneself? I started thinking about Lauren Hill... The Re-Education of Lauren Hill; The Emancipation... The Re-Emancipation of ... and I stopped there.

LIGHTS SHIFT TO LELA

ALTARING

The music and light in the room shift to LELA, she is in her living room and is doing a practice of Altaring.

Candles are lit, Water is poured, objects are placed meticulously.

LELA

The sky is falling and it's embracing me,
The sky is falling and it's embracing me,

...

Do you know what it feels like when I'm in love with you.
If you really want to be free...

If you really, Love is the key yeah...

LELA sits down.

Music plays and she lounges dances, in her
living room.

As the music fades the light fades down on
LELA.

Music and Lights and up on NIKKI.

YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM YOURSELF

NIKKI

"Who's loves you baby"?

My daddy knew freedom but only on the dance floor or whatever there was music. When I was a little girl , I would watch him through rainbow colored eyes. His arms were like wings and his feet were like feathers... I called him daddy soft shoes. No matter where he was...he would take up space. There was times I would watch him dance ...he was running - trying to get away from himself ~ to leave his body. When we danced together , he would ask me the question with his wings outstretched "Who loves you baby " And my girl innocence in pure joy "my daddy "Dancing with my father was where I could feel him the most. But when the music stopped...that's when I stopped feeling him.

See freedom was something he didn't know he had.
It wasn't until he was all the way gone that I realized
Freedom was the best gift my father could give me.

Lights fade down on NIKKI.

Lights and sound up on GERMAINE who is gathering items and ingredients to make biscuits. We watch her for a few moments.

After she gets the bowl and flour, she begins to remember.

Music goes down.

GERMAINE

College....the 60's.....every Friday or Saturday night, a couple dozen of us Black students make our way 'round to a grad student's crib off-campus.... mushy-cushioned thrift store couch pushed in the corner, faded rug rolled back upside the wall, making just enough room for a few couples to take turns on the dance floor. Cheap snacks---sleeves of Ritz Crackers, cubes of yellow supermarket cheese, a bowl of Wise potato chips. Dancin' to Stevie, Junior Walker, The Supremes and the Temps, the Chi-Lites, the Tops, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.... At 17, I mighta been naïve... but I thought the only intoxicants were some too-sweet Catawba Pink or Night Train wine, a few bottles of Champale, maybe some discretely-passed reefer,.... but absolutely the music and the dancing.

Other than the chance to flirt with someone of the opposite sex, there was no reason to be there but to do the Jerk, the 81, the Cha Cha, or an ooh-soo-sloow Slow Drag to purge the pressures, alienations and micro-aggressions of the past week with people for whom there was no need to explain why those few hours of refuge----of maroon space----were so, so necessary. After all, the first time I heard myself called a "nigger" was as I walked across the university Quad to chapel one Sunday morning.

GERMAINE walks across the room places her bowl down on her table and then moves to another place in the room.

I love the way Saidiya Hartman talks about the role of dancing for Black women and girls in New York in the early 1900s. It was their lifeline in tight, airless rooms where they were supposed to make a life..."to make the unliveable liveable." They had to contend with much tighter spaces than I ever did, but like them, I felt acutely the urgency of arranging my body "to escape ...the confinement of a four-cornered (white) world."

We immediately shift to a Break Dance beat.

Metal takes time to draw a circle (cipher) on the floor and then calls everyone to join him.

Metal dances in the center. The music fades down when he speaks and raises when he dances.

METAL (MARK)

OK, It's the last Thursday of the month, which means it's The Gathering. We are at the Gathering. There's a huge mob of people crowding around the big circle in the center of the floor. DJ Illiterate up there on the small stage. Up in the balcony area you can see heads poked out over the railing, watching from above. There's brown paper on all of the walls, and they're covered in big tags with thick black Sharpie. So this is big circle cipher. It never asks for permission. You just go. Or don't. In fact, one of my heroes, Ken Swift Seven Gems formerly of the Rock Steady Crew taught me that the whole dance exists in this split second decision to step into the cipher.

It's 2004. You are RepStyles Crew, which is my crew. You walked here from your apartment up the block. You took the PATCO train all the way from Lindenwold in Jersey. You drove in from Vineland with your friends.

We know that we're going to get called out the second one of us jumps in. We want to look serious but not cringey. This is the most important thing in your life right now. Try and look like you don't really care. We can just groove on the side like this.

Who knows what dance this is? This is a Black Artform invented by children in New York. Late 60's Early 70's. It spread all over the world. It spread to people like me. Now it's officially on. There are 6 basic ingredients you need to battle.

1 = toprock, 2= Drop 3 = footwork, 4 = powermoves, 5 = Freeze, 6 = Burns.

He demonstrates as he explains. Quickly lectures a little about the history of the dance and the parts of breaking, toprock, drop, footwork, power, freeze.

"Look what I can do! I'm tough, I'm here. I'm relaxed."
This whole time I've beethey've been burning us! Let's burn
them back!

Metal teaches them to burn on
the beat.

METAL (MARK)

OK, now I'll throw another round and then end with a suicide.

He ends with a suicide, lying
on the floor.

METAL (MARK)

Everyone quick, rush in and make like a pose around me facing
them.. Anyone catch what this move I just did is called?
That's right, it's a suicide. [maybe Metal does multiple
suicides in a row]

The term Breaking is multitudinous. Does anyone know why it's
called Breaking?

It's not 'breaking your body', but it's the break of the
record and reaching a breaking point, the snap, the Holy
Ghost.

It's the opposite of breaking your body. It's a dance where
you can suicide and bounce back up. For the young kids who
must have felt like the city didn't care about them, it must
have made them feel invincible... okay follow me.

METAL gets the audience to
dance the Toprock once more.

Music shifts to CUNTY - NIKKI takes over
the space.

NIKKI

This place was like no other. My first gay club was The Nile:
rivers run deep. It was more than a club: it was my refuge.
I went out every Thurs, Fri, Sat and sometimes Sun when they
had classics house nights. It sat at the corner of 13th and
locust. The dance floor was on the second floor. I had to
climb a flight of steps to get to the sanctuary. Yes, hunty
it was church...the DJ was God and the dancers was like orishas
or angels or something. It was sooo dark in there but we
were the light.

When I first heard about the Nile, I thought it was some glitz and glam place. Where you had get dress up. The only rule was come ready to be Free.

The dance floor was black/ white checkered floors. It was four parts to the dance floor: one section culture girls - they would kick the dirt up, - over there Vogue/ Runway Divas " 10's across the board BYTCH!", -Tambourines and Hand clap children stood near the DJ booth catching the beat with their instruments, And those that got there life by simply watching us get our life But there was this one ~ He was GOD ~

Lights shift to reveal the Phantom.

The Phantom!!! When he enter the club, he brought so much life. it was like the Sun filled the room. With his Phyllis Hyman pea coat and hat cocked to the side. He would go to the bathroom and come out with a neon-green jump suit- it look like it was painted on his midnight liquid skin. Even his sweat was fluorescent pink. Baby he be in the middle of the floor ...conjuring and commanding US begin stomping feet and Screams) GEEEEET YOUR LIFE!!!

Hoooney when I shimie (begin shimie dance and chant). The NILE water ran deep. The Phantom lead me into freeeeeddom. He made the dance floor a sanctuary. A place with a different kind of love. I got baptized in it every time. My body felt free to be big...bigger than flesh and bone. I could stay on the dance floor forever. No Boxes, perceptions, or judgments didn't exist when I danced. GEEEEET YOUR LIFE!!! GEEEEET YOUR LIFE!!! GEEEEET YOUR LIFE!!! GEEEEET YOUR LIFE!!!

The music fades up. NIKKI encourages the audience to get up and dance.

The whole room becomes a club.

THE COMPANY and The room dances.

When the song is over, the audience is encouraged to go back to their seats.

As they head back, the lights shift dark and we hear a new soundtrack and watch a light show followed by a movement interlude by RA.

The lights dim.

YOLANDA (V.O)

I kept thinking about choreographing freedom...there is something about... thats what is under here. The yearning for that. I also love what ya'll were saying about the body as a site. I don't know how to think about place... citing around that, that would accentuat that but...

RAJA (V.O)

What is popular came from somewhere

YOLANDA (V.O)

From these black folks

RAJA

Came from here, and what has stopped and what ceases to exist is giving these people and their history a voice and a platform, and a structure so that people know. We're trying to unearth what's embedded in the community already.

While this is happening, LELA is getting gloves and a hat on.

Music starts.

In this next section, there is no text. LELA performs her AFRO circles and we watch.

LELA dances a counterclockwise perimeter of the room.

When this is over we shift back to METAL.

Lights come up on the Cipher.

METAL

The Cipher wasn't wide open to me. You have to have something useful to add to the conversation. If you're throwing trash, you'll just get locked out. Go breakdance over there. This ain't for you.

It took me a while to learn that you have to simultaneously be yourself and respect the culture that came before you. My battle crew is REPSTYLES. Our crew is 20 years old this year. I'm also down with a secret collective known as Section 31...DJ Freddie Blast Rest in Power). The founder of 31 is another one of my mentors, DJ SKEME RICHARDS. He's been a Philly DJ since '81.

We don't kick it that much anymore, and that's on me...but just by being himself and being real and taking us around back in the day, he taught me a lot.

One of the things he taught me was this:
'You can't call yourself an all out King if you only doing one thing.'

You gotta be all city. Tags, burners, throws, pieces, whole cars, top to bottoms.

That's talking about graffiti. I don't do graffiti. But that applies to everything.

So there's always room for more.

This dance, this culture, this community has given me damn near EVERYTHING that I have.

I didn't grow up with Hip Hop. I didn't even grow up in America. So Hip Hop didn't really make me who I am. Even more importantly than that, it showed me who I really am. It forced me to be MYSELF.

METAL takes off his shoes.

New music starts.

RA is far away, but not too far. We may hear before we see them.

RA emerges from the crowd.

RA dances.

RA makes it to the top of the slide.

RA

I pour from my cavity all that will be and all that dares to twas, for it is in the, for it is the, for brocheing the now requires empty cup.

Left wit a thick husk primed for ruckus, rapture in the ever never, I am sitting and persistently unavailable to be sat. Hark it be IT, the goop hard to gather in the warm midst. The quick bitch dippin twixt da photon slits. of the rotating photon particles. Hark it is IT that has ...been summoned and drawn preped to wreck and reconstruct. Dat thang occasionally called Bob, a bitch with a build that will unfix it. Caunt Comp I will muse on linear time...

Sirens are singing and their angel song reads as scream.
 Oh Bob. I call upon yo wisdom and disorderly contuck, bless
 the basin with your sweet serene arcane anarchy. Cacoph
 linearity, unrest my soul, stir the pouch of a bonk. Bonk a
 bonk bitch I beseech you to McRattle me bonky.

RA Dances again.

The lights dim.

YOLANDA (V.O)

We talk a lot about social dance versus African-American vernacular dance, those being interchangeable terms. An Vernacular dance was this thing that got into, this process of artistic movement and this connection.. they talked a little about Ellison... The vernacular used to signify forms of dance that have emerged in African American communities and performed in venues usually frequented by African Americans- gatherings, house parties, dance halls. I also saw that there is this. African American dance being characterized by improvisation, movement competition, elegance control.. all of that is something they were kind of brewing around this work in Philly. And then I also started thinking about what is the connection between dance and Violence.

GERMAINE

She turns on radio-----a
 collage of news headlines,
 from back in history up to
 current day----think an aural
 version of Arthur Jaffa's Love
 is the Message, the Message is
 Death. As the radio
 soundscape continues, she
 returns to kneading biscuit
 dough, capturing the reaction
 to the headlines in the
 intensity of her kneading and
 shaking in the body. Flour is
 flying as her movements become
 more agitated. At the height
 of her agitation, she goes
 over and turns the dial on the
 radio-----at first there's
 static, and then Mahalia
 Jackson's version of How I got
 Over begins.

She sits, still breathing hard
 from her agitation. Then
 takes up the central gesture,
 hands on thighs.

Gradually, knees lift as the gesture grows (think Trajal Harell). She sings counter-melody along with Mahalia's song. Focus is internal.

Ray Charles' What Would I Do comes over the radio. She stands and articulates the central gesture very slowly. Arms trace the chest and travel from side to side in opposition to the torso. Focus remains internal. As music concludes, she peeks into oven and then slow retreats back to her table.

The sound of rain begins.

Lights slowly open in the whole room.

RAJA leads a conversation around intimacy.

The lights slowly dim.

This conversation ends with RAJA getting multiple people to slow dance.

As people are slow dancing a Bell goes off. GERMAINE runs to the oven but is caught by music.

She dances and then exits.

RAJA (V.O)

There is something that keep cycling about where you're going and where you're coming from, where you're at and where you're going. The squares are that way. Cities are that way. The club is that way. All of these things are all about- the intersection. This is obviously the way I think - why people come together and what makes them separate- or have to go somewhere else. But also I think thing thing that really pulled at my heart was just that there is all of this wonderful thinking about freedom and very little practice... and I'm like...

Mark stars dancing in the center and is taken over by the sound of birds.

METAL (MARK)

I have one more story i'd like to leave you with...

As I get older, one story keeps coming up in my mind. But for me to tell you this story, we have to go back about a thousand years to pre-imperial China.

[Metal starts getting undressed]

There lived a man in his mid 40's, who spent his whole life pursuing the skill of archery. He made it his mission to prove that he was the best archer in all of China. So, he travelled from city to city, village to village, challenging every archer he could find. He smoked everyone. As he travelled the country battling the best, one name was continually mentioned by the people he met: Lao Zi. "You have to go find old man Lao Zi. He's by far the best archer that ever was. He lives up in the mountains somewhere."

Intrigued, the younger man set out for the mountains to find Lao Zi, and lo and behold, after much searching, he came upon a small, unassuming hut deep in the mountains. Sitting on the porch was Lao Zi, looking straight out of a kung fu movie: About 90 years old, long beard, tattered flowy gown, sitting in his rocking chair with an iron cudgel. "I'm here to call you out," said the man, "I hear you're the best archer in the country. Get your bow, get your arrows, and battle me right now."

Lao Zi paused before answering, "Before we can talk about battling, you first have to prove that you can shoot a bird out of the sky while riding at full gallop on horseback." "No problem," the man said, "I gotta train a little first but I'm that good, I can do that." He went off and trained for a couple of days, and then returned on horseback. "Check this out," he said: he's riding, he reaches full gallop, gets the arrow from the quiver, zzzzzzzz...whap! Nails it, first try. "What's up?"

Lao Zi said, "You did it. But before we can talk, I need you to shoot the wings off of a gnat." "What?? That's impossible," replied the man, "But you know what, I got you. I can do it. I gotta go train. I'll be back."

This training took a lot more time. It took about three years. So three years later, the man reappeared at Lao Zi's hut. "Yo, I can do it. Check this out. See that little fly on the bush over there?" Pulls out the arrow, zzzzzzzz....boop! You see the little wings pop off a tiny gnat in the distance.

And before Lao Zi can say anything, the man says "Yo before you go tell me to do some other stuff, come on man, I just did the impossible. Go get your bow, get your arrows, and battle me right now."

Lao Zi says nothing. As the man is rambling...WHAP! A bird falls from the sky at their feet. The younger man is stunned. Lao Zi says, "I have no bow. I have no arrows. If I so choose (which I do not do often), I simply think of my targets and they come to me."

The young archer was flabbergasted. He returned to his village in shock, in shame, and everyone asked him, "What happened? Did you battle Lao Zi or what? Did you beat him?" He replied: "I know that men and women work. I know that beasts walk. I know that fish swim, and I know that birds fly. But Lao Zi is like the dragon. At once on the earth, in the river, and in the heavens, practicing the art of archery without archery."

So, why I am I telling you this story?

Because, that's what I want to do. I want to practice the art of Breaking without Breaking.

METAL breathes slowly and
begins movement meditation.

MARK dances and then is joined by RA.

RA dances alone in silence.

GERMAINE reemerges.

GERMAINE

"Christ Church theater....June 2024.

Radio static comes and goes.

News stories play.

Radio static comes back.

GERMAINE

Arranging, rearranging this body... making the unlivable livable....escaping the confinement of a chaotic world.

These days, my refuge jam leans into Afro-Latin music---Celia Cruz, Mario Bauza, Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Spanish Harlem Orchestra, Ruben Blades...." Blades' rendition on Ban Quere, with the Lincoln Center Jazz Band plays as I dance a salsa dura. Maybe repeat "arranging, rearranging...."

Music emerges and GERMAINE dances off.

RA dances a sequence through the space.
This time with music.

LELA begins ringing a bell.

A cello drone begins.

LELA (V.O)

porches bathed in a sea of southern baptist backyard
blackness creek, lake, ocean, marsh, bay, gulf lovin' huggin'
tallahassee florida - tally philadelphia pennsylvania -
philly diaspora baby reared downhome homegrown U.S.
red, brown, tan, white sandy clay soul canopy roads - willows
and magnolia house, hip hop, southern bass, chopped and
screwed, pop dance hall, r&b, blues, jazz, hip hop r&b,
shout, lining the hymns kwanzaa frankie beverly & maze &
oumou sangare oysters on the back porch with hot sauce and
vinegar liquor and jesus diasporic being - guinea, ghana,
senegal, brazil, barbados, cuba, south africa, nigeria sway
of the spine down through the creation spaces to caress the
earth lamba, sounou, afro salsa, salsa, yankidi, sorsorne,
gahu, bamaya, hip life, sabar, oshun, sinte, shango, oya,
afro beat and beats, olokun, afoxe, ile aiye, samba in bare
feetroll call - akosua graham, dr. nzinga metzger, mama lynn
jones, grandma, grandad, daddy sylvester jones, ron brown,
urban bush women family, jawole willa jo zollar, moustapha
bangoura, youseff kombassa, danda da hora, edileusa santos,
joan huckstep, nia love, iya oyin hardy, mama dorothy wilkie
mothers of the church in the juke joint veiled masquerade -
what do angels and ancestors do when they are not serving us
nomadic play and ecstasy realizations of ecstasy where the
high is the dance sultry smooth sensual intimacy with self
and collective embodiment of lineages of generations so many
have touched these dances dances that have been touched by
generations traversing forced and/or choiced migration
seeking liberatory ecstasy maroon spaces hush harbors sacred
groves multiple, complex loss of cultural content, histories,
groundings, philosophies, traditions, practices,
physicalities, and realities Reignited, conjured, revived in
the practice of embodiment often oppression, persecution, or
genocide may get us there - it is not what keeps

The diasporic being is a rebuilt being. It is the being that has done the breadth and made choices about the depth. It is not the being that dabbles. It is the being that knows because of time in. It is the being that knows because of time done...time sitting...time moving...time flying by...time resting...time going hard...ancestral time...time building the being, the muscles, the cells, the blood that remembers. It is the being that is earth revival—in one moment solid, moldable and the next smooth...slipping through your fingers...fleeting...ephemeral and infinite...flying from one host to the next...one ripe to another being in nomadic and uncapturable swag luscious ecstasy that answers to no one love and truth translineages transfigurations

Lights out on LELA

NIKKI begins to dance to the cello drone.

Cello drone goes out on NIKKI

NIKKI

Dance in your spirit. Dance in your spirit.

Music begins.

NIKKI

When I dance , something inside me burst in yellow.-joy because my medicine. It feels like love letters written across my body. Where my arms wraps around me twice.

I learned to love myself free. A journey that traveled on many crooked roads but none so deliberate and resilient than the path that led me back to me.

Freedom is my birthright. The permission I give myself to feel out loud!!!

Music Fades up.

The COMPANY joins NIKKI.

They dance.

They BOW

LIGHTS UP ON ALL THE ROOM.

HOUSE PARTY CONTINUES.