

November 21, 2016

It's hard to know where to begin.

First and foremost, what made an enormous and indelible impression on me were each of you. The clarity, intensity, and passion of your words, actions, movements, and just presence left a world of impressions that I cannot yet fully fathom. Their incredible articulateness, both in words and in movements, in expressions, and in body language impressed me in ways I have previously experienced in encounters with great art, great literature or poetry, great music, or great theater; I did not expect to experience that at San Quentin. The candor in what you said and did, and the intimacy of the venue, greatly expanded the set of impressions on me. In particular, I will never forget the looks on your faces and the depths of feeling in your words as you either responded or listened to your colleagues & responded to questions from other members of SQ or from visitors.

Second, although it is perhaps implicit or even express in what appears above, the sheer physicality of what we saw was truly remarkable. Entering the room, we guests walked under a paper canopy through a gauntlet formed by the men, standing tall, motionless and silent while Richie slowly, somberly, and silently played the National Anthem. That created the first set of physical impressions, and made it clear to me that we were in the company of a group of very serious and extremely focused men.

That opening was followed by a number of strong elements of the piece, but what really nailed me was the dance/gymnastics/acrobatic performance by Banks and Choy. I was astounded to see two men who are in several respects so totally different from one another, performing as one in about as demanding a series of steps, moves, and actions as I can imagine, and to do so with total grace and intense fierceness at the same time. I was similarly moved by several of the other dance elements of the piece, but the one I think of as wind sprints-with the line of boxes down the center of the room- was a powerful visual and emotional moment, and the words they spoke/shouted were equally powerful, both with respect to my understanding of hundreds of years of African-American experience, but especially in the aftermath of the recent racially-charged Presidential campaign and election.

My third set of reactions, impressions, and emotions comes from the Q and A, and from the all-too-short time we had to talk with you and with other men who were not part of the Ensemble. Some of the men were physically imposing to me- a 73-year old white man from suburbia. But to a man - to a man! - they were each caring, articulate, and compassionate men. My sense was that they wanted to interact, to communicate with, to listen to, to hug and be hugged, with and by those of us who were from outside - there was a form of longing in their eyes and their words, coupled with a recognition of the gulf that separates us. The opportunity to be there, to observe and experience those moments of what I viewed as joy, happiness, and real humanity is something I will cherish for a long time.

There were important and thoughtful questions and comments from visitors, but some of the most important, to me, were questions and comments from other men - from Bull and Habib,

and several others – which were incredibly insightful and in a way revealing and illustrative of what we were able to see and learn and experience from the performance. I found myself wishing that the Q and A could go on for a lot longer time.

Listening to comments from Banks about the importance of bearing witness, and from RC about how being in the Ensemble allowed him to cope with what he called “phobias,” and from the man Rauch (not sure I got his name right?) who bared his soul, lost the ability to speak for a few moments, and then talked about the importance to him of Ensemble and of Shakespeare – those beautiful and raw moments gave me, and I suspect other visitors, a deep appreciation for every one of these men, their depth of character, their incredible insightfulness, their even more incredible courage to participate in the Ensemble and to be who they are with themselves, with each other, and with us – all of that adds up, for me, to the fact that even though they are where they are, they MATTER – to themselves, to the others in the Ensemble, to the entire population of the institution, and to us on the outside as individuals and communities and as a nation.

The metaphor for me in the beginning: the reiteration of forms of chairs in space and the non-conforming shapes of real people in relation to this order; draping over them, kneeling beside them, sitting slumped. Order trying to contain these large muscular, sprawling bodies that overwhelm the size of the chair. And yet, both remain present at the section's end. The sturdy, unremitting 90 degree angle of the chair and the living breathing humanness of each man.

The language of the two men as they circle

'Your people die.'

"Your friends are paroled."

Disappear

The list of 16 ways to disappear. Stated clearly, facing the audience while simple group gestures and movements frame the speaker. Movement and text, speaking even louder than the disrobed words alone, evoked whole states for me, leaving me gutted and reeling by the end of the list:

"Stand behind something more important than you", as a wadded up piece of paper is dropped in front of each man.

"Stand behind something bigger than you." As the speaker retreats behind the wall of other men.

"Agree, agree, agree."

"Be as still as furniture."

"Move like growing grass."

The line of faceless bodies up against the wall, blanched into being indistinguishable by wearing boxes on their heads.

And of course, as a dancer and choreographer, I was completely thrilled and twitching in my seat watching the duet. What a thing! The physical power, the finesse, the strength, the delicacy, the mix of sensitive lifting and supporting with precise gestural follow through. The musical choice gave the piece a drive, but the men exploded its predictability. The dancer/choreographer in me just ate it up and also loved that it left me wanting more. The way the space was changed and filled, even while falling within the prescribed limitations of working in relation to the wall and corner. The surprising and daring nature of some of the catches and the implied trust gave me everything I ever want in a dance performance.

I still see the 2 quintets: 2 speakers and 4 supporters lifting and transporting the two around the space while stories of power and disenfranchisement are told. Who is above whom is not something that either of the speakers have within their control.

The boxes with generic body parts; each box contributing to the outline of a generic person plastered up against the back wall.

The line of boxes indicating the tracks the two men had to run—the tracks set by their families and time period they were born into and how that mixed with their

own particular connection to race. One was perceived as not enough black, and the other had a relation to what being black is from a whole other continent. For both, these tracks dictated the way they had to run that course.

The line of the men laying out the paper doll cutouts in front of each and naming each of them. Their victims, their loves, their mothers, their last link to not falling off the earth? I'm not sure at this point who these flat pieces of person-shaped paper were. They were male and female names and, I gathered, someone with whom the source of this piece is corded into each of the men. They were the other 16 who were in the piece but not seen.

The beautiful duet song linking all the mothers, with overtones of remorse, gratitude and regret. What lovely blending voices they have.

The audiotape played at the end from a CD player that sits alone on a chair facing the audience. The voice of the woman sounds middle age, sounds white, sounds American. Listing all the ways, she, in her life, has never known any of the myriad of challenges of the daily, cultural, race, social, class, economic sort that many of the inmates have listed as the backdrop of theirs. She is not in San Quentin except as a voice. Her circumstance and the experiences that grew from it have meant their reality will most likely never be hers. What is justice and where does it have its seeds? This piece doesn't try to answer this question, but it makes me aware that the voices of the men I've heard here are pure and trustworthy and wise, not in spite of their circumstances but because of how they have transformed themselves in relation to them.

The white paper frames, the separators. The mystery of who is behind, the suggestion of wanting to make contact. The one on the other side who makes contact with each hand, for a brief moment, and then is able to move away. The hands behind the separator remain.

I am shredded by what I've just witnessed. Freddy asks me my last name as I leave so that I can be marked off the list and it takes me a while to pull myself back to where I can answer him.

During some part about 2/3 of the way in, my heart was so wild inside my chest that I had to press both hands on my sternum to help manage its energy. I let it ride, deep and wide, thoughts fall away. The performers were speaking directly into the megaphone of my heart. Heart and head in proper measure. I felt safe and the thought came that I knew a new kind of safety. I felt safe in a large group in a high security prison. Not just with one of the performers, but with all of them. I know I'm in the presence of some hard won wisdom and this is what it feels like to be in the presence of passionate truth-telling.

I don't know that I've ever had that reaction to an artistic work. That whirring heart reaction. In fact I'm pretty sure that I haven't. The rare mix of sandblasted raw

content delivered with transparent presence and the power that each of the artists projected hits a new high bar for me in watching performance art.

To each of you in the Ensemble, I hope you feel deep pride in what you've created. From your willingness to do the excavation that was essential to arrive at these offerings to being so naturally powerful as you speak your stories. I can imagine that this has taken many years, many workshops, much dismantling and many tears for most of you. That you met the inevitable resistance to this and decided it was worth it to face it, enter it and move into and through it is why this piece holds so much vibration, import and promise for me. That all of you on that stage had your unique version of this journey and you were generous and trusting enough to share it first with each other and then with your audience is a gift beyond measure. Thank you for doing all that it took, individually and as an ensemble, to be able to take that next leap into using yourselves as source for building this exquisite art piece that added so much more to my appreciation of the essential human requirement of seeing and being seen.

Your work helped me arrive in myself in a way that I wasn't aware that I'd disappeared. I think the heart whirr was my body's way of telling me that I prefer to be and feel safer in the presence of truthsayers and those who are courageous enough to speak up about all of it. I don't know if I have that kind of courage but I know I'm attracted to it. You are more honest than most. And your participation in this work says to me that you are also wise enough to know that everything is compost for seeds that are planted by taking a newly chosen path. Planted, watered, fertilized and tended with practice on the personal and the community level. Ways to Disappear is an exotic, one-of-a-kind flower of your own making and tending. Thank you for letting me enter your garden.

Dear Artistic Ensemble,

I want all of you to know that the show was deeply engaging from start to finish. There are many moments I do not mention here that I found as powerful as those I do mention.

When we entered the chapel, the audience members walked under a long strip of paper, held up by the performers. For me, this had the effect of transforming the room into a holy space. We were transported, with the Ensemble as our guides, away from the chaos of the world and into the world of the performance. I felt nurtured and honored as I walked down the aisle (it reminded me of both graduation and my wedding.) In these first moments, the performance was already turning any audience expectations on their head, casting you all as shamans, mentors, or tour guides. You weren't there to "tell" us something, but we were certainly going to learn during the journey you were taking us on.

Every scene of the performance was both thematically and aesthetically complex. By this I mean that not only were the ideas profound, challenging, and diverse, but the ways in which they were presented were profound, challenging, and diverse. For example, I commented to Choy and Banks that a lot of the movement felt like it could be read in multiple ways: a hand on the shoulder might look like a gesture of solidarity, but then seem like a gesture of oppression. Likewise, the range of emotions contained in every single scene defied an audience member's efforts to describe a performer's perspective in a simple or reductive way. One example of this was the "Dear President Elect" piece. For me, this piece was humorous, distressing, and sobering. I appreciated the idea that some people are disenfranchised regardless of who is in power. And here again was the duality of movement: when someone was lifted by the group, they were both elevated and powerful, while also at the mercy of those who held them up. The performers on the mics were speechless—sometimes this seemed as if it was because they were too distressed to speak, sometimes because they were not allowed to speak, and sometimes because they didn't care to waste their breath on such a worthless cause.

If I had to pick a favorite scene, it would be the piece Can't Do/Have Anything. I guess you could call this scene a rant, albeit a tightly controlled—and justified—rant. As the list of things people could not do grew longer and more varied, it felt increasingly powerful. I grew very angry watching the performers' righteous indignation. One thing that was so powerful about this scene was that even in the narration of all these things they could not do, the ensemble did not present themselves as powerless. It was a dressing down of the system, a stern accusation from a group of people who recognized their own humanity in a world that tries to deny it. (At least, that was how I read it.)

The mother scene was the most moving part of the play for me. I tried to imagine each woman as she was named. This piece felt intensely personal. I could feel from every performer that they had a unique story about a mother figure in their life. These stories made each ensemble member come alive as an individual, separate from everyone else, even if we did not get to hear their story. But it made me want to hear those stories.

Someone mentioned that this is your third show as an ensemble. I want to recognize the physical, vocal, and emotional skills you all employed, as well as your ability to share the stage with each other. Visually, I loved the range of ages, body types, energies, and skin colors on the stage: your differences made it all the more powerful when you came together as a group. Thank you for sharing your creation. I look forward to seeing more, and I would be honored to work with you in the future.