

REVIEW:

Naked King: Subject to Change – Part 1
Dance Box Theater
Dance Place
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By Val Oliphant

Dance Box Theater's co-directors Laura Schandelmeier and Stephen Clapp began Saturday night's performance of *Naked King: Subject to Change – Part 1* with an acknowledgment to the Native American tribes who originally owned the land that is now Dance Place's stage, and the history of slavery and its continuing impact. A fitting cap to National Dance Day, Brentwood, Md.-based Dance Box Theater's performance explored racism, inequality, and white patriarchy through dance, live music, and narration.

The beginning of the dancing was reminiscent of *A Chorus Line*, as Schandelmeier and Clapp set themselves up at a dimly lit table, paper and iPads in front of them, and called, "Places please." Four dancers with linked hands entered in a line, arms waving like a long, single thread of seaweed.

As the dancers huddled together laughing, the directors asked "Donna" to enter. In clomped the "Real Donna J. Trump" wearing a massively long tie suggestively hanging out from the bottom of her suit jacket, accented with hot pink chunky tennis shoes and a purple "Make America Great Again" hat. Famously pursed duck-lips completed the look.

Throughout the show, the directors order about Donna, played by Pricilla Smith, often telling her to direct the dancers. When Smith sets up a duet between Tariq O'Meally and Melissa Lineburg, it looks like Trump is directing a porno. O'Meally lies on his back as Lineburg climbs over him and undulates her arm. Trump watches eagerly from her seat. The narrators pipe in, "Will people make the wrong assumptions about this scene? No, that would be so *heteronormative*." But, of course, we have been primed to interpret it exactly as such and therefore feel guilty about our "assumptions," even if they were based on the choreography and not the assumed genders of the dancers.

Naked King continues along in the same manner, with heavy-handed commentary on social issues, including racism, abuse, sex work, capitalism, and white supremacy. Smith tromps around the stage and through the audience playing American classics like "This Land is Our Land" on her flute and whistling like a drill sergeant at the dancers. Ronya Lee Anderson sings a gorgeous rendition of "My Man." Though her voice gave me goosebumps, the cringe-worthy lyrics focus on a woman who still loves her abusive, cheating man. The directors toast themselves for their brilliant work with an actual bottle of champagne.



The program promised to answer the question: “How does our culture navigate towards truth and healing when bombarded with celebratory misogyny, sexual aggression, and blatant racism at the highest levels of power?” So far, we’re just bombarded.

One dancer, Valerie Branch, doesn’t follow orders as enthusiastically. Sometimes she refuses to move, and looks incredulously at the others. At times she lets out a silent scream. Meanwhile, the other three dancers convulse and pant as they run through the same eight steps over and over -- arms stretching diagonally then gently winding around to frame their face, one leg beveled in front like Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, before collapsing onto all fours.

Fleeting moments of tranquility offer some respite. When the lights turn a soft blue and green, and we’re transported underwater as Anderson and Branch flow in unison, limbs snaking through the air and softly weaving around their waists. At another moment, birdsong pipes through the air, lulling us into a sense of hopefulness. The spell is broken as O’Meally’s hands circle his throat like a noose, then clutch the sides of his head as he violently nods back and forth.

Branch eventually snaps, her scream no longer silent. The fourth wall is broken as all the performers vent about the show’s confused messaging and perpetuation of racist stereotypes. The dancers run through a series of “fixes,” but many of them are worse. Smiling lends the choreography a creepy minstrel feel, and swapping in one of the black female dancers in the duet implies that all black women are interchangeable. None of the fixes are satisfactory, save one of all the dancers parading Anderson on their shoulders like a queen. “Why are we good with seeing black bodies suffering up on stage?” Anderson asks. The question, like many here, remains unanswered.

The show ends with the dancers pulling up the original call for auditions on their phones. As they compare it to their performance, they find they have met their objectives except for the last: ending with a “community-led dialogue.” As they abruptly walked off stage, trailed by the directors, the house lights lifted on a befuddled audience. It’s difficult to get strangers to interact without a little more hand-holding. Some community-engagement techniques from interactive choreographer Liz Lerman’s creative toolbox might have engendered a more interesting and productive conversation among audience members. Instead, most people chatted with those they came with as they exited the theater.

Naked King: Part 1 perfectly encapsulated Dance Place's theme of "amplify": shows will challenge audience members to broaden their world views, change their perspectives, and connect with their and other communities. While the dancing was phenomenal, it was hard to concentrate on with constant programmed interruptions -- from Donna, the directors' running commentary, and the feeling that you needed to "get" the message, although it wasn't clear what exactly that message was. I'm curious to see if Part 2 will answer how we can actually move toward healing.

Photos: RC Schandelmeier, courtesy Dance Box Theater