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A scene from James Thomson's "he is his own mythical beast." (Photo by Maria Baranova)

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Beyond Whiteness: A January Festival Wrap-Up

What I saw when I chose to focus on artists of color at Under the Radar, COIL, et al.

BY NICOLE SERRATORE

I once asked a prominent New York theatre critic if he actively made an effort to write about work from artists of diverse backgrounds. He said he relied on the theatres themselves to make inclusive programming choices and just reviewed what they put on. Not all critics get to select shows to review, of course. But it seems to me that being entirely passive in your selection is a political act. Particularly when you have the chance to pick from a large menu of options, as we New York critics do each January, during festival season.

But as much as I've tried to be conscious and inclusive in the work I choose to view and review, this year I realized that in the past I had been just as lax as that critic, picking randomly from festival catalogs based on what sounded interesting but not being mindful of where I was concentrating my attention or wielding my power (such as it is—let's not go crazy here). So I decided to be pro-active this year when I attended the [Under the Radar](#), [COIL](#), [American Realness](#), [Prototype](#), and [Exponential](#) festivals. I wanted to try to decenter whiteness as much as I could in the shows I booked, and so I focused on work by artists of color. This was not just about representation but also how art was framed and gazes were cast.

This approach brought me to an ice rink to observe the radiant opera singer Alicia Hall Moran skate while she sang in acknowledgement of the 1988 Olympic skating showdown between Debi Thomas and Katarina Witt (*Battle of the Carmens*). It led me to take selfies with performers (they insisted) as they moved around an art gallery (*[lavender swatch]: a self-portrait*). It landed me an offer of free soup and a consideration of 1960s protest movements and effective political action (*Free Free Free Free*). And at one point I found myself reading Shakespearean sonnets to myself while an audience watched me (*Ike's Wonderful World of Leisure*).

In the 19 festival shows I saw, theatremakers tackled death, rituals, cinema, art history, politics, activism, race, wormholes, ancestors, sex, secrets, confessions, and pain. I saw work by African-American, Asian, Latinx, Iranian-American, and indigenous creators. Some of these artists were non-binary, LGBTQ+, disabled, and/or women. Some white men even

made appearances! But even within this broad spectrum of experiences onstage, I found that problematic tropes can still crop up, and intersectionality can be lacking.

To wit, *Mugen Noh Othello* (Under the Radar), an ethereal Japanese interpretation of Shakespeare's play which centered Desdemona and her suffering. Traditional "mugen noh" theatrical tools include a chorus, drums, and the introduction of the story by a disguised ghost or spirit who cannot cross over because of its anguish. Here, director Satoshi Miyagi and writer Suehiro Hirakawa keenly shifted the focus of Shakespeare's piece, giving voice to Desdemona through this narrating restless spirit. At last her story and her agony were not overshadowed by the machinations of Iago or the rage of Othello.

But Miyagi chose to darken the skin of the actor playing Othello in this production. Regardless of how this might be read in Japan, it was put before us in America; and though the character of Othello was smaller than usual in this production, this use of blackface swallowed up everything, dragging in its entire history, whether unintentional or not, and worked in dissonance with the adaptation, reminding American audience of segregation, minstrelsy, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation. None of these was likely the point of this production, but such is the weight of this dehumanizing racist practice. With show after show in the festivals focused on prejudice, violence, erasure, abuse, or the white gaze, I couldn't blithely overlook this blackface or minimize it without becoming part of its cruelty.

This *Othello* might be held in stark contrast to David Thomson's *he his own mythical beast* (COIL), in which Thomson donned a black latex mask over his own black head, thereby directly and intentionally calling for a conversation about black identity. Slipping into this second skin, a flowing white dress, and high heels, Thomson called himself Venus (in reference to Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, whose black body was put on display in side shows in the 19th century), and flashed his own naked body to us from underneath his dress. Race, gender, and sexuality were all at play in a piece that questioned our assumptions about what a black voice and black body are.

Apprehension of the white gaze created a searing moment in Nic Kay's dance-heavy, solo biographical show about race, queerness, and activism, *Lil Blk* (American Realness). In one scene Kay, physically boxed in by a square of white light and contorted into a twisted ball, began on the ground, then struggled their way into a standing position. But there was no release even when they were finally on their feet: Once erect, they spoke of white audiences watching their black body as entertainment.

Casting attention back on the audience and interrogating white viewership was central to the piece, as it called us out both for acts of active oppression and for passive acceptance of white supremacy and racism. Kay poured every ounce of themselves into this performance, and when the piece ended I felt I had taken far too much from them—more than my share, at least. It's a consideration we all might want to reflect on about the performers who share their labor with us.

I felt a similar kind of invasion when Nona Hendryx and Kiki Hawkins sang a rendition of "Strange Fruit" in Hendryx's work-in-progress, *Parallel Lives* (Under the Radar). Focusing on the personal and musical commonalities of Billie Holliday and Edith Piaf, Hendryx assembled an *Avengers*-worthy team of killer vocalists, including Celia Faussart, Tamar Kali, and Raven O for this concert-style presentation. When they sang "Strange Fruit" with tears running down their faces, it was difficult to watch, as they bore the weight of a song about black people being lynched by white people. But that's why it had to be sung. It reminded us why we must bear witness to our racist history, as it's not really history at all.

Indeed, in the explosive and penetrating *Séancers* (American Realness), Jaamil Olawale Kosoko did not have to reach far back into the past to conjure spirits of black lives that have been needlessly lost to violence. Using a varied visual language of decadence and trash, with shimmering silver walls, inflated condoms filled with confetti, voluminous wigs, plastic dolls, and piles of tulle, the piece was symbolic and cathartic. Through movement, music, and voiceover, Kosoko hosted a nonlinear spiritual and musical ceremony that summoned voices, called for living life big and loud, then juxtaposed this against the devastating, smothering horror of violent death. In recognition of Eric Garner, Kosoko called out repeatedly "I can't breathe" as he was swallowed up by the detritus he had amassed on the stage, a tumult of bodies and objects.

And in *Pillowtalk* (Exponential) by writer and director Kyoung H. Park, two frames of symbolic white illumination surrounded a gay married couple, one Asian American and one African American. Each time they came together onstage, it was within an area defined by this shrill white light. Who this couple was with each other had been impacted by years of dealing with, reacting to, rebelling against, and being oppressed by whiteness. Though the production was strained at times (a queer pas de deux in harsh neon seemed visually at odds with the emotional content), the myriad questions posed about survival, suffering, and activism provided a rich background. It addressed sex/race/power/marriage in way I've never seen before.

OnEdge - lil BLK by NIC Kay



Not everything I saw was looking at racial strife or personal pain. Angela Goh's transformation through dance, *Desert Body Creep* (COIL), was equal parts defiance and mischief. With electric guitar music conjuring a '70s road trip or echoing screams, Goh was playful and yet in control. Whether it was her body or the space that was morphing or changing, she held a firm dynamic tension with the audience. She animated a giant gummy worm, flopped like a fish, burrowed under and through fabric, and unexpectedly emerged naked. The potential for all these textures, shapes, and objects, including her own body, to evolve into the unexpected made for a compulsively watchable performance.

The duo of James Harrison Monaco and Jerome Ellis, who go simply by James & Jerome, incorporate music into storytelling, with contemplative results. Their tag-team art history slide presentation, *Museum: Lecture* (Exponential), combined personal narrative with a focus on the object of visual art. With quiet resonance, they dug into who made the art, the circumstances around it, who got credit, and what went into it (earth, bark, skin, metal). With music that varied from electronic vibrations to a slow sustained saxophone note, these storytellers were in a reflective dialogue with artists from the past.

For a bit of fun, entertainer and comedian Ikechukwu Ufomadu's droll *Ike's Wonderful World of Leisure* (Exponential) instructed us on the best ways to relax. Ufomadu's light-hearted approach is that of a Dick Cavett-esque host who relishes language, PowerPoint, and audience interaction. He's got a puckish quality. Even though I was brought onstage, and in a panic offered a really boring legal term when asked to say the most interesting word I had

read that day, the often amusing presentation-style show was resilient enough to survive my weak contribution.

In the end, of course, whiteness was not wholly absent from what I saw, or from the lens that saw it (me). It was often a frequent specter haunting the work, as it haunts American life. But intentionally giving space and time and attention to these voices of color pushed me to be more aware, active, and responsive to the work and world around me. My 2018 New Year's theatre resolution going forward: Binge consciously.

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