

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kelly Strayhorn Theater

Ugly Numbers Part III: The Dance Apocalypse

by Nicole Bindler

Ugly Numbers is a three-part series on gender inequity in contemporary American dance. [Part I](#) investigated the data on gender discrimination in Philadelphia dance presenting. [Part II](#) included analysis of the data and interviews with select Philadelphia dance presenters and makers. This final installment is a first person account of my experience navigating an uneven playing field.

How can one quantify personal experience? The numbers tell a story of systemic gender discrimination in dance, but what does that *feel* like for an individual? I don't have any personal stories that illustrate overt discrimination because of my gender. This does not mean that I haven't been affected or that such discrimination is not pervasive, only that personal tales are by their nature anecdotal. I've always sensed that my gender has influenced the opportunities I have had and the way my choreography is read. My response has been to make work that stares the problem in the face. Recently, in order to demonstrate the inequity that I have always perceived, I started looking at the numbers. What follows is the backstory, a lifetime of accumulated questions and challenges layered onto my dancing body.

It seems as though it was written on my bones that I would become a provocateur, an experimentalist, an artist whose work collides against societal norms.

When I was seven, my grandmother took me to see the musical *Oklahoma*. In the front row a girl was crying. One of the actors stopped mid-line to ask her if she was okay. Her mother assured him that she was fine, and he returned to acting. But the moment when he broke character and took on an authentic voice and posture was monumental for me. Although he resumed character, the spell had been broken.

When the actor responded to the girl's tears, the space was more electric than at any other time in the performance. I want to make work that questions the strange contract of performance—that you will politely sit and watch while I reveal something to you. What if the witness does the revealing?

At age eight my gymnastics teacher at summer camp took note of my budding gymnast's body. He spoke in Québécois French to another instructor as he pointed to the various features of my spine, legs and butt. The next summer I auditioned for a play that had no name. The director, a wild-eyed actor, began to devise a scriptless piece with four of us kids. He had us improvise our lines based on characters we spontaneously conceived and then asked us to memorize the best of what we came up with. He didn't write anything down. The work was transcribed on our bodies. I never did gymnastics again.

I want to relish the brief, thrilling immediacy of being alive, to create work that allows the viewer to see me in my aging skin. I want to use my body as the medium for my art, but I do not want my body to be an art object.

At age ten I sat across from my mom at ZZZ Diner on University Place eating breakfast. My mother showed me an article in the [New York Times](#). A woman named Michelle Anderson had insinuated herself into the Miss California pageant by training, acting and charming the judges of the Santa Cruz pageant. She made her way to the state level then pulled a banner from her bra that said, "Pageants hurt all women." I was riveted and could not wait for my opportunity to infiltrate and expose an injustice.

Because I am a woman, my body onstage is viewed through lenses of scrutiny and sexualization. As a response I have made works that confront and subvert this reality. Sometimes the work has positively transformed my experience of my female body in performance. Sometimes it has painfully perpetuated oppression.

At age thirty-three, I was backstage at the Rocky Awards in a white glittery dress with no underwear. Annie Wilson was standing next to me, subsumed by a snow suit, the hood covering her face so she could not see. Gabrielle Revlock was on the other side, in her bikini and heels. As we waited for our cue, Gabrielle proposed a new collaboration...

Gabrielle: "Hey, I got into *The A.W.A.R.D. Show!* again."

Me: "Why the fuck would you do that again?"

Gabrielle, coyly: "Well, I thought that maybe we could do some sort of a subversive response..."

Pause.

Me: "I'm in."

That winter we created [I made this for you](#), a piece that critiqued women's competition to be performed *at* a competition, The A.W.A.R.D. Show!

In *I made this for you*, Gabrielle performs a virtuosic hula hoop solo to the Spice Girls and I attempt to one-up her by performing a sensual, new-agey, nude solo. I say: "Gabi, did you know that the egg from which you were conceived was inside of your mother's ovary when she was inside of her mother's uterus and that this matrilineal history tethers us to the past like a string of pearls?"

She replies: "What I'd like to know is what the judges have to say..."

Later Gabrielle and I ask the audience to vote on whether they want to see her Yoga dance or me makeout with someone from the audience. We disregard the votes and do both, simultaneously.

While it feels empowering to use spectacle and nudity to critique exploitation, sexual content can sometimes become the aspect of the work that audiences hook onto.

At a Seattle performance of the show, a woman exuberantly volunteered to be my makeout partner onstage. (My game of eenie meenie miney moe intentionally lands on an audience plant.) She followed me to the cast party and harassed me all night. At one point she stayed in the public bathroom while I urinated, describing in detail her experience of defecating in the same stall moments before. She asked for my phone number, told me she wanted to be my best friend.

Although Gabrielle and I are commenting on sexism in dance, there's a possibility that it might be perpetuated if the viewer doesn't grasp our critical stance.

Other times the viewer understands the critical stance of the work and simply doesn't agree with it. A male dancemaker in Philadelphia posted on the facebook page of his female alter-ego: "I don't go for that Nicole Bindler type rolling around naked with her stuff hanging out on stage and 'doing justice' to the feminine image stuff."

The feminist politics of my performance make me vulnerable to attack by those whose work functions within existing gender norms. When my work about oppression elicits personal abuse, it makes me question whether it's safe to continue.

Then I hear a girl in the audience crying and I ask her if she needs some water.

In [an interview](#) with photographer Carrie Mae Weems for Corbis she says: "I'm always trying to figure out how to unpack, how to use this frame (motions to herself), as a representation for any number of things outside of and other than its blackness. But for the most part blackness can only stand for itself, in the same way that women can often only stand for themselves, so that the experience is a 'female' experience or it's a 'black' experience. It can't stand in for a more broad, human experience, which I think is a serious problem."

Gabrielle and I continue to wrestle with this problem in our duo now named: "The Dance Apocalypse." If the body is at the center of choreographic practice, how can a female-bodied person address the problem of the male gaze without her gendered body becoming the primary aspect of the research and choreography?

A few months ago, I decided to look at the numbers with a desire to expose the truth about the lack of opportunities I perceive for my own work and others' and to uncover some of the reasons why. Through research and reflection, I have come to more painful, more personal questions of why I make the work that I do. I wonder what kind of work I would make if my body didn't feel so entangled with my experiences of misogyny.

I wrote about the numbers in the hopes that it would provoke more equity in the dance field, but as I turn inward and ask myself what I'm looking for, I find that equality isn't what I want or need. It's change.

In her book *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, bell hooks writes: "Feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates the Western culture on various levels—sex, race, class to name a few — and a commitment to reorganizing society..."

The numbers are just the external manifestation of a much deeper problem. If dance educators, funders and presenters were to miraculously balance the scales tomorrow, the numerical equality would be meaningless without a structural transformation of the field.

Dance can be a microculture where there are ample space and opportunities for those whose voices are infrequently audible or understood. I want to see a landscape in which marginalized dance artists are provided the context for the fullest expression of their thinking bodies.

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