

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: WIVES

Behind the Screen, Liveness

by **Meredith Bove**

In an extended scene from the work-in-progress showing of ACTION MOVIE, the members of the Montréal and Toronto-based multi-disciplinary performance collective [WIVES](#) (Julia Thomas, Emma-Kate Guimond, and Aisha Sasha John) shake, collapse, and gesticulate in front of a large moving digital image of Liam Neeson's face. The women are distinct, miming confrontation, mouthing indecipherable words, and pointing imaginary guns at the audience before their gestures dissolve into something less namable, shape-shifting between seizures, undulations, and slow, decaying descents. On the screen behind them, white men are fighting, blowing holes in each other's bodies, and dying. It's business as usual for Hollywood. Yet still I notice my involuntary physiological response—raised heartbeat, sweaty palms—signs of my body trying to anticipate what grisly image might be around the corner. In this particular clip, Neeson's character unleashes his wrath—no one is spared.

Rewind to the beginning of ACTION MOVIE, and the atmosphere is off-the-cuff, cheeky even, in reference to forms of everyday violence clearly drawn from the three women's lived experiences. Scattered throughout the performance space are various objects, including red head-sized bouncy balls, chains, mylar, orange wigs, metal prongs, and a strip of pale green styrofoam. The women use these objects to create a series of "new weapon ideas"—playful antidotes to satirized aggression. They wander through the space, first exploring, and then assembling the objects into spontaneous sculptures. For example, from a pair of red spandex pants and a plastic bag, they invent "The Slingshot of Doubt and Shame," meant to deflect violent acts back onto their perpetrator.

Occasionally these weapons fail and malfunction. The performers improvise, spontaneously adjusting their explanations of the sculptures. Sasha John states authoritatively after one of her weapons malfunctions, "We are constantly working to improve our technology." It's messy, and in that way, reflects how everyday violence must often be combated instantaneously, on the spot. Later, the women frantically gather the objects into a plastic sheet, bundling and tying them as though to contain their power. The objects are then strung over a beam on the ceiling only to be dropped to the floor once more. Finally, they push the bundle out the door together, huffing and puffing. All this expended effort is somehow fruitless—no real change has been enacted, only an illusory rearranging of what

already existed.

When weaponry is absurd, meaningless, and ultimately ineffective, how then, to combat the very real violence and aggression that exists in the world? The WIVES escalate from their slapstick charades toward a display of genuine rage, as each one takes a turn downstage center to deliver a verbal retaliation to a silent offense. There's talk of ripping eyeballs out, of throwing punches in the face, of cutting off dicks and stuffing them in orifices. Were the quips and jokes of earlier only a ploy to make our laughter now seem misplaced, to drive home the actual severity of the topic at hand? They look past the audience at some imagined enemy. Still, I feel confronted, perhaps less by their threats and more by their demand to be seen, by their demand for us viewers to bear witness to feminine anger and not turn away.

The WIVES jog in place in front of three video-panel backdrops, which blink between cityscapes, night scenes, and hazy shapes. Their running-in-place transitions to light jogging forward and backward, bringing them far downstage. Sitting in the front row, I notice my bodily response in this moment mirroring the one catalyzed by the movie clip—slightly raised heartbeat, a feeling of excitement caused by their closeness. The immediacy of another body feels suddenly healing. Behind the smokescreen of antics, absurdist objects, and over-the-top Hollywood violence, ACTION MOVIE offers a contemplation of dissenting bodies pushing against patriarchy, bodies as the site where violence occurs, bodies as a study in liveness.

ACTION MOVIE debuts January 30-February 3, 2017 at Theatre La Chapelle (Montreal). <http://www.allmywives.com>

ACTION MOVIE, WIVES, Vermont Performance Lab, "In the Works" Series, Oct 19

By Meredith Bove
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