

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Joan Marcus

Aren't We All Rosie?

by Gregory King

Imagine sitting on your front porch exchanging pleasantries with a few really good friends. Friends who indulge in your eccentricities, patient enough to listen as you create fantastical worlds far from your reality. Friends whose idea of fun is simply to share your space, laughing with you at everything, sometimes laughing at nothing.

Now imagine those exchanges taking place in your elementary school years, against the backdrop of a Carole King musical score, on a street called Avenue P. This was the mood of *Really Rosie*, the closing production of New York City Center's Encores! Off-Center series, where ten cheery children were cast to tell the story of Rosie, the self-proclaimed sassiest girl on Brooklyn's Avenue P, who entertains herself and her friends by directing and starring in a movie based on exaggerated stories of her life.

Directing her third Encore! production, Leigh Silverman was hesitant to sign on to this project as she wasn't particularly in sync with the sensibilities of a children's show (she admitted in a late-night conversation that the last production she directed included an orgy). But after she listened to the music, memories of her own childhood conjured hilarious depictions of what life may have been like for children on Avenue P.

Watching the performance, I remembered [an article](#) by Tim Crouse for Rollingstone.com, proclaiming Carole King to be the most naturally, unaffectedly black of white pop stars. And it made sense that Silverman would play a dance genre that has its roots in African tribal dance—tap—to King's music. Still I had to ask Silverman: why? Why tap? And why a collaboration with choreographer and tapper Ayodele Casel?

Silverman told me about a performance of Casel's that she saw which made her cry: "I told myself that I would work with her some day. And as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I called her saying I wanted to work with her."

She explained to me that she thought the musical number Casel performed ("Alligators All Around") with Kenneth Cabral, who played

one of Rosie's friends, was intentionally simple because it was a learning song—a song to learn the alphabet. “I wanted to preserve the integrity of the intention but give it a point a view and vision that Cabral, [playing] an older kid, could deliver.” She admitted that she imagined “Alligators All Around” as a song Alligator grew up listening to, but now he gets to put a new spin . . . a new interpretation on it with tap, performing a crowd-pleasing duet alongside the unmatched Casel.

Because with tap, the body becomes a music-making instrument that involves nuanced weight changes that affect rhythmic syncopation. And let's not forget the pulsing sounds in every shuffle (a step performed by brushing your feet forward and backward), or every ball change (a quick change of weight from the ball of one foot to the other).

In a testament to Silverman's commitment to inclusion, there was a singular moment when every character on stage donned pink feather boas, singing the “Really Rosie” (reprise), walking out into the audience. It was a bit cliché, but all the while overflowing with symbolism in its display of unity and community.

The queer man in me shook off the surface representation of gay pride, leaving me with a subtle, more meaningful allegory of oneness. And I was left wondering: how much of me do I pour into my art?

How much of Silverman was in *Really Rosie*?

How much of Silverman was really Rosie?

How much of Silverman's own identity as a queer woman influenced the themes she introduced and illuminated?

How and where had Silverman's own identity impacted her direction?

The answer to this I already knew; who we are, somehow, plants itself in everything we do—even if unintentionally so.

In poised reflection with the busy sounds of New York City in the background, Silverman affirmed my understandings: “I feel like my identity is in everything that I do. The character Rosie is an artist [...] she's a visionary. She's not just the bossiest, but she has a point of view. And as a queer female director, I wanted *otherness* to be understood, appreciated, and then be represented. Parts of all the stories I tell are about queerness, about femaleness; but in a universal way, it is more about being 'trapped' and using your imagination to get out.”

She could have cast showbiz kids, but wasn't interested in telling the stories of actors. She saw this as an opportunity to bring to the stage people who may not have been afforded such opportunities—and in so doing, maybe the audience could see themselves reflected in what was shown onstage.

So for everyone who grew up having to create their own worlds, worlds of fantasy where they truly belonged, *Really Rosie* was really us.

Silverman ended our interview saying, “In more ways than one, we're all Rosie, because in the greater scheme of things, aren't we all trying to imagine our way into a better life?”

Really Rosie, Encores! Off-Center, New York City Center, August 1^s, <https://www.nycitycenter.org/pdps/expired-productions/really-rosie/>

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