

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Charlie Arnold

The People Speak: Belle Alvarez & ILL DOOTS

by Rhonda Moore

Belle Alvarez's *Ageless Dream: Historias Nuestras* and ILL DOOTS's *Existence, Resistance and the Sounds of Surroundings* bring to mind American film producer Robert Evans's well-known quote: "There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. And no one is lying. Memories shared serve each differently."

Dance artist Alvarez and music-making collective ILL DOOTS are the young artists selected as representatives for the Painted Bride's 2017 BrideNext initiative. Conceived as a way to deepen the Bride's relationship with young adults "falling loosely" between 24 and 38 years of age, the project calls for young artists interested in using art, activism, and community as touchstones for igniting change. Similarities and contrasts in mission and modality sparked conversation between the two groups. Their November BrideNext performance is one of many fruits harvested from the field of the neighborhood, bringing the voices of the community—cacophony and all—to the stage.

Though gentrification and immigration certainly aren't synonyms, as phenomena they are similarly evocative of movement, of searching, and of change. Honduran-born Alvarez's *Ageless Dream: Historias Nuestras* focuses on justice and selfhood, ageless struggles for American immigrants. ILL DOOTS's members come from many different places around the United States and even more diverse individual backgrounds. The musical consciousness of the group, however, rests upon a shared love for living and for learning. The serendipitous encounter of a young, energetic drummer, a bassist, and a freestyle-rapping acting-student gave birth to the raw, organic, and fresh ILL DOOTS. The now eight-member collective mixes elements of jazz, hip-hop, and funk to create musical statements that reflect individual and collective participation. In more ways than one, the group is an exemplary microcosm of what many of us see as we imagine "utopian" diversity: cogent individuals of varied extractions and points of view, all willing to share in talking, listening, and perhaps reshaping personal ideas after discovering new perspectives. What better bone to pick for such a motley and apt crew than the problematic gentrification of Philadelphia-at-large?

Both Alvarez and ILL DOOTS went in search of the people's voice. Through a series of community partner-generated workshops, including Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, New Sanctuary Movement, Marie Dendy Recreation Center, The Village of Arts and Humanities, and The StadiumStompers, North Philadelphia participants' stories provided the raw material for an evening of music and dance, in celebration of individual and collective struggles for acceptance, insertion, and appreciation in new situations and places.

In Alvarez's piece, donia salem and Ani Gavino join her on an odyssey through border towns, distant roads, interrogations, and hellos and goodbyes. Shared interest in the physical manifestation of identity, place, lineage, transition, and migration make these three dancers ideal travel companions. Public and intimate memories of each one's geographic and cultural histories meet as the women tell their stories, influenced, too, by the collective memory of local community voices.

The ladies are able griots, squeezing corporeal meaning out of the spoken word. Fierce, precise performers, they are unafraid to reveal the multifaceted nature of the human condition. They travel, rest, encourage, and comfort one another while moving in the space with assisted air-borne phrases, intricate floorwork, and moments of individual exclamations of strength and anger, frailness, gratitude, and joy.

ILL DOOTS's performance brings the voice of the people out of North Philadelphia, onto the stage and, hopefully, into the hearts of Philadelphians. Their words and melodies—more like riffs created for purposeful repetition—are products of the many conversations held after questions asked. They speak of love, pride, ownership, witness, concern, ignorance, and anger, attempting to understand by listening, then embodying in sound. Harsh, grating chords and expletive-laden spoken word alternate with the soft, pathos-filled tones that extreme tiredness, reflection, and frustration often bring forth. The community voices wonder about ulterior motives and rationales of new businesses and initiatives in their neighborhood. The band weaves real stories from lived experience, forum perhaps for further conversation on the subject. The questions remain: are you watching or doing, welcoming or rejecting, giving or taking? Belle Alvarez and ILL DOOTS attack these queries in sound and movement, in artful measure, and perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the midst.

BRIDENEXT: Belle Alvarez & ILL DOOTS, 11.17-18, Painted Bride Art Center, <https://paintedbride.org/events/bride-next-showcase/>

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