

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jose Quintana

Hip Hop Dance Theater Offers More Truths Than Dares

by Megan Mazarick

Truth: Do you like rap music? Does it have the N-word in it? Name a rap song you like with the N-word in it?

Dare: Act out a time you were truly scared.

Truth: Describe when you have experienced imposter syndrome.

An intimate game of Truth or Dare, including the above dialogue and other verbal exchanges, was the scaffolding (and title) for a hip hop dance theater duet created by Emily “Lady Em” Pietruszka* and Joshua “Supa Josh” Culbreath, co-directors of the newly formed Snack Break Movement Arts. Seasoned performers, life partners, and members of Rennie Harris Puremovement, they are beautiful dynamic foils for each other. Emily’s performance transmits directly towards the audience with wide-eyed characters and evershifting physicalities. Josh’s performance interiority is set against his hyper-athletic and agile movement world; watching him is like spotting a superhero fly by.

They start the piece with a game of one-upmanship, taking turns weaving into and out the floor. There is an attention to musicality and Josh and Emily embody the soundscore (which includes fusion jazz, recorded text, poetry by Raphael Xavier, rap, and a sound clip from a viral YouTube video) by following the drive of the rhythms and melody. Emily pops and quicksteps in time to the drum. Josh's breaking floorwork matches the keys. Later they place one another into a series of frozen poses and their bodies become architecture: crumbling, deconstructing, and rebuilding. Emily holds Josh parallel to the floor and releases him into a wandering handstand; Emily is held in the same pose minutes later. A game of Rock Paper Scissors creates transitions between sections of the dance. At times they speak to each other and at others they request audience participation. Each dancer has a solo framed by a question of truth or dare, as challenged by the opposing dancer.

Dare: Act out the moment when you were first learning [halos](#).

Josh attempts the move and falls short several times. His attempts include impossibly twisting freezes, threads, and a gasp-inducing diagonal back handspring-meets-coin-drop movement. He occasionally consults a notebook as if he will read or remember a note that will make the trick work. He repeats the action several times, referencing his book, tearing pages, and eventually throwing it across the stage in frustration. He ends this solo on his back, exhausted in a pool of light. It is not the action, but the process, that is enthralling.

Truth: Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a hip hop practitioner and white woman was challenged?

Emily's smile falters and I wonder if the question is improvised or rehearsed. Her recorded voice answers, "I was with you till the end," several times as her long arms float away from her body. She stutters and pops into a series of grimaces and pantomimed accusations, and her body creates instant characters inside of the rapidly switching shapes. These characters point, freeze with mouths wide, shrug, soften, and change again. I wonder who the "you" is in her recorded text? Is it the viewer or her own self doubt that she embodies?

I am looking for a truth in performance: Can lived history be held inside of the body and released upon demand?

Later in the dance, Emily and Josh solo simultaneously in two boxes of light. Emily is putting on a flowy shirt, skirt, and earrings while a female's voice laments "today's music" as being full of inappropriate language. The audience is in on the joke: a typical "[Karen](#)" complaining about Black music as offensive. Emily occasionally speaks the text with the woman and mimes actions of disgust and anger, eventually fragmenting these actions through the jolts and stops in her body. Josh's body is electrified; he springs into Emily's box and catapults her out of her own spotlight by pushing her into the air with his legs. For me, this is *the* moment of the evening: the frenetic breakdancing positioned against the theatrical popping highlights the skill and experience of both bodies. The Black superhero vanquishes the evils of White privilege while the audience cheers.

Emily tells us, "I am about to cry for real." Josh describes his proposal to Emily. While they live in the virtuosity of the movement, there is something deeper in the vulnerability they create onstage, something about what it means to dance our races and many faces with someone you love. These truths are more complicated than the dares.

I dare you to be vulnerable.

* Truth: I am a student of Emily's Beginner House [dance class](#) on Wednesday nights at Urban Movement Arts. Dare: I dare you to join.

[Truth or Dare](#), Emily "Lady Em" Pietruszka and Joshua "Supa Josh" Culbreath of Snack Break Movement Arts, co-presented with Urban Movement Arts, May 13.

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