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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Carolyn Stanish

Realness For the Patrons - Rennie Harris Beautiful Humans Lies: Chapter 4

by Noel Price-Bracey and the Write Back Atcha Audience

Let's confront the obvious. Rennie Harris, the choreographer, is a Black Street Dance artist. Megan Bridge, the performer, is a white contemporary artist. For myself, a young(ish) Black educator, this dynamic is long questioned and still makes me raise my eyebrow when thinking of the level of publicity the show has gotten in the 2025 Philadelphia Fringe Festival. Even still, there are layers beyond the superficial look of *Beautiful Human Lies: Chapter 4*, an Evening-Length Solo by Harris for Bridge.

Harris' history of setting work on and moving with artists of different disciplines, including the 2015-2017 Butoh performance with dancer Michael Sakamoto or his 1997 work on Philadelphia Ballet, leaves little room to wonder why he would choreograph on an artist with no street dance experience. It is also relevant to share that both Bridge and Harris are beloved in Philly.

In two sections of the performance, Bridge verbalizes the question "Why would I want to see a *white woman* performing hip hop." This inquiry was posed to her by a white person and a Queer person of color. The general and racialized query works against the mission of the umbrella many call hip hop. Street dance is instrumental—to break barriers and build community across race and class. My question as a witness is not general, it is directed at Bridge and the supporting container; rather than the *white culture-they*, used as a scapegoat to soften the privilege of this particular performance.

Why *does* Megan Bridge need Black culture or hip hop to explore ageism, femininity and evolution of the self. What level of vulnerability or hospitality does Blackness bring to the table for her? Why 25 years ago, the time of the original solo, why now in the midst of a strong professional career?

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THE SET UP (N)

Bridge enters the stage, fitted in a salmon color tank top and brown capris pants widening slightly at the calves. Digital noise projects on the back wall. A spotlight highlights the left side of her face. She opens her mouth performing an “opening announcement.” Her voice catches; her hand abruptly covers her mouth as if she miss-spoke. She backs away on the diagonal moving through parallel bourrées, vibrating gestural vignettes and highly athletic floor work. I desperately waited for the rhythm of the breaking or the Funk of the street dance vocabulary. It all seemed to avoid the groove. The work develops with repetition: bourrées, monologues, and skillful floor work shifted slightly in a new direction or a level change. I hear Rap, R&B, and bits of recorded discourse between Bridge and Harris from years past intermixing Bridge’s spoken confessions.

As the evening progresses my focus drifts off, my eyes scan the mostly middle aged to old white crowd speckled with a few young folks of color. Many captivated; my distance makes me realize this show is not for me; an East Coast transplant with no personal connection to the performer. This evening *is* about connection though, her connections – to her students, friends, returning collaborators, and possibly most importantly herself. With that said I graciously take a back seat and rely on the voices of the audience members who, following the show, participated in a *Write Back Atcha*: an after show talk back facilitated by myself with the support of Miryam Coppersmith and Nadia Ureña. It’s been my pleasure to thoughtfully bundle thematic material from this conversation in an effort to offer you a greater sense of *Beautiful Human Lies: Chapter 4*.

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AMERICAN REALNESS (M)

A Shake - A Tremble (M)

White supremacy (A)

I reflected on my own journey (A)

Truth, truth, truth. Such hard work to explore yourself and the world all around. Looking inside, looking outside, letting people in.(A)

WHITE ANXIETY (A)

I felt the repercussions of intercultural concern in the audience members sitting near me. (A)The reaction ranged from palpable discomfort to curiosity as to “the point.” They wondered if feeling uncomfortable was part of “what it was about” (A) As a ninety-year old I’m always having to remind myself to pull myself together. Was that what she was doing? Pulling herself together after a long day? Or am I reading too much into the gesture? (DN)

SISTER REALNESS (M)

Bees and vibration, snakes with tutting and undulations.

The vibrations, choking and bee images resurfaced throughout... This felt real and authentic to the program...they seemed summoned

up from bodily experience. (A) I had to laugh when she put her hand on her crotch and pulled herself to her full height.(DN) In all its femininity, nasality, vitality, apology, authority, tremor. The solidity of Megan's balance and her clarity of movement (M)

This iteration revisits this work..., also bringing age to the conversation, questioning of curiosity(B) So brave, so strong. Moving to the core.(A) I am physically and emotionally confronting Megan's confrontation of just the violence of aging and "technique" and text and performance.(N)

REALNESS (M)

I feel the line between liking your performance and liking you is very blurry. (DG)

When you're never asked to be real before (M)

What does that look like? (M)

Vomiting up (A)

Race, Dance, appropriation, love, bias. (A)

The shaking and curva lines inward, arcs of the body and the spiraling embodied and performed and experienced are hypnotizing, and paralyzing. It's a lot and it's violent. (N)

Scary and funny(A)

Megan embodies both the student she was and is, ever-curious and interested in learning..., the hegemonic expectation of a white woman in dance. Both embracing the movement material she is exploring, as societal pressures and her body [are] rejecting it. (B)

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Harris' choices have always served as acts of transmission, allowing Street Dance to live on the proscenium stage as well as in community. With this work Rennie Harris created a container. He offered space in his movement vocabulary for Bridge to confront or perform Realness.

Key:

(A) = Anonymous

(B) = Benja Newnam

(DG) = Duana George

(DN) = Donald Neville

(M) = Miryam Coppersmith

(N) = Nadia Ureña

[Beautiful Human Lies: Chapter 4](#), an Evening-Length Solo by Rennie Harris for Dancer Megan Bridge performed Sept 6th - 8th at The Proscenium at The Drake. This *Write Back Atcha* is brought to you by thINKingDANCE in collaboration with FringeArts.

Homepage Image Description: *Tables and chairs form a “U” shape to the left of the photos frame. One person with brown skin and glasses is visible through the negative space of two onlookers facing away from the camera. Bystanders stand or sit in the distance.*

Article Page Image Description: *One dancer balances her bent right leg, left leg lifted, out stretched to match her opposite arm. Words to the left of the frame written on the back wall read “3 laws of hip hop.” The rest of the stage is nearly black.*

By Noel Price-Bracey

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