

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Veronique Ellena

Love-ish Letters: Write Back Atcha and Jerome Bel's Gala

by Julius Ferraro

The experience of watching Gala is distinctly joyful. A cast of about twenty individuals with a range of abilities and body types performs a series of moves, one after another. A professional dancer moonwalks to Billy Jean, then a ten-year-old boy, then a young woman with Downs syndrome, then a middle-aged woman without much flexibility, then a man in a wheelchair. They do the same with a grand jeté, a bow, and free improvisation. The piece ends with a series of company dances, each led by a single performer, the rest of the company stumbling to keep up, often literally.

Our audience burbles with excitement and enthusiasm. There seems to be genuine appreciation of each performer's generosity, as dancer after dancer gets spontaneous ovations, and for various reasons—sometimes simply for showing up, sometimes for the mastery with which they execute the move. And yet I experience fear, too: fear that applauding simply because someone is able to execute a simple step is patronizing, or the opposite, that the hard work of trained dancers is somehow negated.

After the show, with the lobby is still bustling with friends, family, and well-wishers, a group of twelve or so audience members, including thINKingDANCE writers and others, huddle into a corner of the grand, high-ceilinged lobby of the Prince Music Theater to scribble some thoughts about Gala. Here is how some of us wrestled with this conflict, in letter form:

Dear Jerome & Dear Gala,

I love the direct possibility you give to the people to be onstage. It assumes that we're in a process of playing. With a joyful letting go. I love the lightness you give us as audience. It's a real mirror for thinking again about the reasons we keep on going to the show or playing onstage... as people... as a way to share... to engage. How we can laugh. Jerome Bel is laughing about the whole situation of going to a theater. - Dominique Jegou

We seem to be going in circles. The highs—so high, so joyous, so unpredictable. The lows—awkward and stuttering as we learn what it is to “be in the world together.” You are earnest and methodical, silly and sublime, all at once. And the show goes on, a collection of our past together, a nod towards what you might do in the future... I miss you, but this time I wanted more than a joy ride, more than self-serious physical challenges. What are we really revealing to one another? When can I see your most vulnerable self? - A Fan

When the dancers first appeared on stage for *Gala*, the first thing I noticed were their different body types, ages, race, disability and dance abilities. When *Gala* ended, what I noticed is that all of the dancers showed the pure love, joy and simplicity of dance that can be embraced by us all. Now let's all at least try to catch that baton! - Morgan Hugo

I love you but I have some issues. Maybe I want too much, or maybe your love is too much for me. I love you in spite of myself. At first, it was awkward, I was cringing and not sure what to do/expect/want from this. I saw an empty stage... And then, they entered one by one, put on display like a parade of children in costume. I felt anger at you and sad for them and also so much and then there were awkward places. Suddenly I realized I am laughing and clearly it's life... you make space for them to show their brightest colors, to show that we all have bright colors, that I have them too. Wild exotic birds, all of us. —Janna Meiring

Sympathetic kinesthetic response to pedestrian movement. Created a connecting momentum. Broad base of movement/dance/kinesthetic experience that broadens the access of dance. They grow the intellectual access to dance lifting the curtain of elitism so more can enter the world of performance. Too often the dance community makes the uninitiated feel they have no right to participate. - Joan Huckstep

I am so glad you stumbled, leaped, and baton-twirled into my life. Before we met I always thought dance required lots of skill and technique. While there certainly are aspects of dance that stand out in performance, I now see that experts are not experts at all things. You have shown me how experts transition to learners and ones out of their element at times. In fact, “elements” are completely contextual and can keep us in boxes if we are not careful. It seems what's more important than constantly being skillful is showing up and being—in whatever form that takes. - Leah Schumacher

I enjoyed our evening together. You are charming, charismatic, and quite cute. However, I will not be seeing you again. It's not you, but it's not me either. It's us, and I think that if we take a moment just to be honest with ourselves, we both know it. It may seem unfair for me to say that I know you after our brief hour and a half together, but I don't feel I'm missing out on much. I enjoyed myself during our time, but I feel it's unlikely either of us will gain much from more time together. Thank you for sharing so much joy with me. It was refreshing. But even refreshing can become monotonous. Too much difference and everything starts to feel the same... -Scott Rodrigue

You are famous and smart. You are good with deconstruction and quite brilliant at setting the mood. Your fame is something I'd like to talk to you about more in detail. When many years ago I saw [Cédric Andreux](#)—I was flabbergasted. I loved it and thought about it for at least a year... But fame and emotion are something that I feel you just bombarded me with... I felt you toyed with my emotions a bit. So many times I wanted to cry or laugh and I didn't understand what was the purpose of you pushing my primal buttons... —Zornitsa Stoyanova

You, the beguiling, sassy, spirited *Gala* company gave us your all and we showered you with the love of four curtain calls. After each curtain call, you seemed delighted and maybe a bit surprised by a full house audience falling head over heels for each of you. We loved your differences, your efforts, even to toss batons high in the air only to have them fall like rain among you instead of into your waiting hands. -Jonathan Stein

Baby Bowie
Running wheels.
You can moonwalk.
All the feels.

-Liz Green

Gala, Jerome Bel, Prince Theater, Sept. 13-15, <http://fringearts.com/event/gala-2/>.

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October 1, 2016