

4 Critical faculties

See me, feel me, touch me... move me!

Donald Hutera confesses he's not shy about spilling onto a stage when opportunity knocks

Rules for performers vis a vis most critics: don't talk to me or touch me, and never ever expect me to become actively involved in what you're doing. A fellow critic says she wants to sit back and let the artists do it all for her. That's not necessarily my style. As this same colleague once usefully explained, the difference between us is that she's interested in product whereas I'm keen to delve into process.

Honestly, I'm not an exhibitionist. So what is it with me and the oft-dreaded but trendy concept of audience participation? Well, there's a lot to be said in its favour. Embodied knowledge and all that, which I'd interpret as those things your body/mind/self doesn't even know it can already do that a workshop or performance might unlock; things to be felt, learnt, realised especially if you sidle past self-consciousness and surrender to the moment.

Generally, then, I'm not shy about taking part in a performance when an opportunity arises. It can be a lotta fun. In the past few months I've dressed up in a snazzy (and possibly authentic) 19th-century military outfit as part of The Salon Project, a rather dazzling re-creation of a classic Parisian salon by the Scottish company Untitled Projects, and was unexpectedly invited to vocalise during a work-in-progress sharing by the young UK theatre company Milk Presents. Without thinking about it I launched into the early Liza Minnelli ballad *It's a Quiet Thing*. My rendition, however, was something of a misnomer. Suffice to

say that the three cast members were comically taken aback by this ol' show tune queen belting out the entire song. You could say I milked that moment.

Of course not everything I experience in a performance context affords me a chance to rise and shine (or – always a danger with audience participation – make a right fool of myself). That includes a lot of what I witnessed at the 'international festival of live art, activism and performance' called SPILL. There, artists have license to do things like pee on stage (as The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein did in *Splat!*, a lively melange of pop music, post-feminist fairy tales and pseudo-porn) or symbolically de-scale and gut a fish (as Season Butler did in *The Woman Who Walks On Knives*).

SPILL also offered quieter 'drama'. One of the most serene examples, and something in which I played a briefly prominent part, was Julie Vulcan's *I Stand In*. This Australian artist spent a full day (11am-7pm) at the National Theatre Studios anointing a new body in public every quarter-hour. The premise was that you enter a warm room naked beneath a white sheet, lie down on a brightly-lit massage table and allow Vulcan to rub grapeseed oil into your (discreetly covered) skin. This stylised corpse-washing ritual was a nod to global tragedy and what Vulcan deems 'the relentless procession of bodies that are you and me and the person down the road.' According to a handy programme note, 'In this work voluntary participants each put a face to a number, a presence to a concept



and collectively return the cold hard statistic of a death toll to the flesh and blood of an individual and what it means to be mortal.'

There was nothing erotic, let alone prurient, about the experience. Rather, being a living corpse was sensual, solemn and, for those observing Vulcan's caring task from a respectful distance, possibly profound. I trusted her and was literally in her hands. Nor was there any need to burst into song on the slab.

Elsewhere this past winter I got in touch with my inner Zorro via a two-hour introductory class at North London's friendly Fighting Fit Fencing club. As our instructor Craig pointed out, the artfully codified sport of parry and riposte is beneficial to dancers



Donald, Adriana and participants at Adriana Pegorer's tango release workshop and 4th anniversary party, London. Photos: Gigi Giannella www.gigigiannella.net

because it draws directly upon core body strength. Well-appeared for my own protection, I liked the sweaty cut and thrust of fencing, the click-clack of blades and the precision, speed and need to keep form when wielding (with an almost limp wrist) a lightly-held but weighted foil. En garde!

Last but not least, I dropped in at one of Adriana Pegorer's improvisational tango workshops. Held in a church in Notting Hill, it was more social than performative and ultimately self-instructive. What did I learn? From Pegorer, that the philosophy of improvisation is based on 'you kind of know but you never know'. In other words – trust your instincts. An individualised group warm-up – from basic walking to focusing on arms, legs

and twisting torso – led naturally to contact with others of all shapes, sizes and levels of dance experience. Soon I'd truly stopped caring what I looked like (even if I did feel I was sometimes klutzing around with preconceived notions of tango style in mind) and surrendered to the flow of motion welling up and spilling out into the stream of energies whirling through the room. For me such freedom, however temporary, equals happiness. It's one of the most welcome feelings that participation in any kind of dance or performance can bring.

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