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Reviews: Gender under the microscope in 'Queent' and 'Boys in Trouble'

Fauxnique and VivvyAnne Forevermore exploded drag's cliches, Sean Dorsey Dance took on toxic masculinity and gender performance.

By Marke Bieschke, March 18, 2019



DANCE What happens when drag gestures are codified as dance? What happens if drag *struggles* are brought to the dance arena? And how can drag be used to probe both dance and gender? Fauxnique (aka Monique Jenkinson) and VivvyAnne Forevermore (Mica Sigourney) are two of our most insightful artists who have been asking these questions for several years in their performances together. (Separately, Jenkinson tackles feminist issues and Sigourney geopolitical ones, both wonderfully).

Their latest, “**Queent**”—which opened the 2019 CounterPulse Festival, themed “To Be Free,” on March 15— was abstract and mesmerizing: Sigourney, especially, has a way of making drag seem challenging again, by amputating its familiar punchlines, playing it straight-faced, as it were, and warping it into something weird. Jenkinson compounds this with serious acting chops and a sparkling stage presence. You aren’t getting any easy laughs or clever “reveals” here—this drag is eerie and open-ended.

“There’s a common drag queen rule—don’t tell anyone what song you’re going to perform,” the artists note in the program, as a way of deflecting questions about their intentions. Meaning seemed subsidiary to short-circuited glamour as, in the opening, both queens walked like very slow Egyptians through the crowd to an endlessly looping “Love Boat”-like theme.

Later, Fauxnique managed to imbue an onstage electric fan—necessary equipment for any drag show—with a quality of random, existential struggle. (I thought of Beckett as confetti flew aimlessly). And both donned hip-thickening body suits for a mirror/runway exercise that brought up their differences, and similarities, in gender, and heightened the cartoonish aspect of femininity that drag plays with. (The title “Queent” is a naughty portmanteau in this regard.)



Photo by Robbie Sweeney

Jenkinson the professional dancer/choreographer and Sigourney the career drag queen provided a fascinating hour of movement some might recognize, but couldn't quite be nailed down with a "Yasss, Queen!" (A very short bit of lackadaisical lip-syncing to over-played pop songs is all you're going to get from traditional drag.) At the end, a hypnotic stretch where the two tumble into each other in slow-motion, grappling their way to the floor and out of their clothes, provided a poetic outro. Both performers are so good at this by now that you wonder where they'll take it next.

Ideas carried forward in Sean Dorsey Dance's "**Boys in Trouble,**" a returning work that served as Dorsey's 15th home season, March 14-16 at Z Space. The work evolved from a series of community meetings and workshops Dorsey held throughout the country, dealing with the topic of masculinity, mostly in its toxic form. Dorsey, famous as SF's first transgender choreographer, and his first-rate company turned this subject and its consequences into an exhilarating night of dance, dialogue, puffing of chests, and limping of wrists. There was so much rich material that the energy never flagged.

The focus of “Boys in Trouble” is Dorsey’s own autobiography, which complicates any easy notion of the gender binary, especially when it comes to expectations of how trans people should act and present themselves. “Gender is over!” is one of Dorsey’s exhortations, and it was liberating to hear him speak about loving Barbies and pink leotards when he was young (as opposed to more familiar trans histories) and not wanting to fit into any masculine mould later in life as a trans man. A breathtaking moment during a monologue where he simply confirms the fact that we can do whatever we want with our bodies seemed revolutionary, mostly by dint of Dorsey’s expert timing and stagecraft.

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Throughout the evening, dances were accented by recorded voices and pretty music (much of it by Anomie Bell and Alex Kelly) and punctuated with comic bits and broadly played pantomime. These interludes managed to bring freshness to perhaps overly familiar material—white fragility, the patriarchal clubhouse, how men act around each other—by deploying up-to-the-minute takes and terminology on the subjects. (Has Dorsey been reading my Twitter feed?) But it was the dances that really opened the material up: Dorsey’s choreography is clean and undulating, so easy to watch and full of momentum that I always want more of it.

A lovely opening that likened the distressing emotional tenor of the times for queer people to flocking birds did, yes, bring us bird-like formations, but the real story underlying the piece was breath: How are we holding our breath in these dark moments? The dancers breathed conspicuously and, sometimes, in concert. It was a blessing and release. Later, a dance about a queer-bashing included a pointed section where the attacked caresses their attackers—forgiveness? attraction? a form of letting go?—and the costumes blended into one another. (Tiffany Amundson designed the costumes; Clyde Sheets did the lights, including

some clever periods of darkness.)

Other standouts were a pas de deux by Arvéjon Jones and Will Woodward that turned on the deep complexity and beauty of the love Black men can have for each other, an elegant solo in toe shoes by Nol Simonse, and the wonderful stage presence of Brian Fisher, whose little wave atop a pyramid of dancers at the very end made my heart leap. Why? It all comes down to Dorsey's choreography, which can whip a perfectly whimsical gesture from the churn of contemporary concerns. "Go on with yourself."