2017-2018 PEAK Journal

Office of Arts + Cultural Programming

PEAK Performances at Montclair State University

Claudia La Rocco

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14 WOMEN WHO WILL ROCK YOUR WORLD

THE 2017/18 SEASON
CELEBRATING
Women Innovators in the Performing Arts
“The temper of the times demands a statement: there is no excuse for the remarkably slow progress toward gender parity in the arts.”

— JEDEDIAH WHEELER, quoted in THE NEW YORK TIMES
Walking the Talk

Dear Peak audience member,

As the saying goes, you can talk the talk all you want, but if you do not walk the walk, you will not go anywhere. A young woman composer said to me recently that it’s about time that we looked more closely at the creative work of the larger half of the world’s population. Very true.

In the last 75 years, only eight women have won the Pulitzer Prize for Music. BUT… four of those were in the last seven years! The Peak 17/18 season celebrates women innovators at a moment when the national conversation about gender equity is infused with new passion: employment and rewards are paramount issues. I worry that the women innovators of our time are not being recognized for their unmatched role in the creative revolution that has made ours a glorious age (despite its current disappointments) rich with very smart art works.

To deepen your awareness of the singular artists featured in Peak’s 17/18 season, I asked that our brochure be a thought-provoking magazine. I invited the brilliant artist, writer and editor Claudia La Rocco to select women to write about the artists and ideas associated with each work in the Peak season. A corps of women assembled to write about women innovators. This is more than a walk; it is a sprint.

To say that I am happy is an understatement. See you at the Kasser!

Sincerely,

Jedediah Wheeler
Executive Director, Arts and Cultural Programming

Editor’s Note

When Peak Performances approached me about editing this catalog, I imagined something similar to how I think about a theater’s season: a container in which individuals with different sensibilities might engage in conversations both direct and oblique. I’m all for gender equality, and on this, as with other issues of access and equity, the arts have a ways to go. And yet I’m not interested in women writers per se, anymore than I am women artists — the adjectives that draw me are “smart,” “provocative,” “thoughtful,” “funny,” “strange,” “evocative.” Those were the sorts of words in my mind when I invited the writers in the following pages to contribute, and I love seeing how they have chosen to engage with Jed Wheeler’s programming. With his permission to go after think pieces (hurrah; the world has enough puff pieces), I tried to give the writers specific but open prompts, so as to celebrate a variety of forms, approaches and styles. There are as many ways to respond to art works as there are ways of making art: I hope, dear reader, that you enjoy (and by enjoy I mean wrestle with, question, debate!) the examples that follow.

Claudia La Rocco
Editor in Chief
# The 2017/18 Season

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Programs in this season are made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts; the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts; the New England Foundation for the Arts National Dance Project, with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Trust and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; and the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Women Innovators in the Performing Arts
2017/2018 Season

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Maloy Luakian
Jessica Lynne
Jana Perković
Larissa Velez-Jackson
Sophia Wang
Kelsey Wroten

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Arts + Cultural Programming
Montclair State University

www.peakperfs.org 5
In late May, I attended an awards show that celebrates the excellence of women in the American theater, during which a well-known playwright gave a speech about how detrimental critics are to the artistic spirit. As a critic, a woman and a feminist (not necessarily in that order), I could barely contain my contempt for this precious, simple-minded show of rah-rah-ism, which lessened the dignity of the occasion by falling for the “us and them” divide between artists and critics. This is nothing new, of course, which is why it’s time we understand ourselves not as cultural opponents, but as equal contributors to a continuum of ideas and aesthetics.

There can be no real celebration of women innovators in the performing arts without a celebration of women innovators in performing arts criticism. It has been a discipline for some of the most forward-thinking and extraordinary female intellectuals in American letters, a platform for women to witness culture and say something about what they’ve seen. The first theater critic I read with relish was Mary McCarthy, having discovered in my college library a collection of the reviews she wrote between 1937 and 1962 for the left-wing journal Partisan Review, in a column titled “Theatre Chronicles.” McCarthy didn’t write theater criticism because she was interested in the dramatic arts; she wrote because she was, to the marrow, a critic. She was given a column because, to the good old Marxist “boys” who ran the Review, theater coverage was more or less deemed woman’s work and therefore something she could do. The journal paid for her tickets to avoid the impression of criticism-as-promotion, and timeliness took a back seat to the time a writer should be given to write.
PERFORMING ARTS CRITICISM HAS BEEN A DISCIPLINE FOR SOME OF THE MOST FORWARD-THINKING AND EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN IN AMERICAN LETTERS.

MARY MCCARTHY
Photo by Horst Tappe/Pix Inc./The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images
McCarthy went at her marks with unreserved wit and ferocity, invariably writing her reviews, as she explained, “late at night, after the dishes were done.”¹ In hindsight, she held American theatrical productions to a standard they hardly seemed to hold for themselves: as works of literature, cultural productions worthy of rigorous intellectual dissection. She bowed to no sacred cow: Clifford Odets (“each new play seems a more shocking caricature of the first”²), Thornton Wilder (“an elaborate system of mystification … to persuade the audience that it is witnessing a complex and difficult play”), and Tennessee Williams (“it is impossible to witness one of Mr. Williams’ plays without being aware of the pervading smell of careerism”³). Because the majority of produced plays then were written by men, it isn’t far-fetched to read certain of her reviews as precisely aimed at a quaking mid-century machismo when it saw fit to soothe its aching conscience (around capital A-art, money, success, women) by giving its audiences undue middlebrow beatings.

I happen to agree with many of McCarthy’s assessments of those playwrights, but agreeing with her — or any critic — isn’t really the point. “I’ll take a plot of level territory and stake out a claim to lie down on it and criticize the constellations if that’s what I happen to be looking at,” Jill Johnston, the notorious dance critic for The Village Voice, famously declared in 1965 in her landmark essay, “Critics’ Critics.” “I also stake out a claim to be an artist, a writer, if that’s what I’m doing when I get to the typewriter and decide that I liked something well enough to say what I think it’s all about.”⁴ Johnston joined the weekly paper in 1959, writing the “Dance Journal” column at a time when art and dance and performance were dissolving rigid cultural boundaries. She was an early proponent of Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris and Merce Cunningham, writing in perambulatory prose that not only mapped her labyrinthine mind, but also liquefied the art/life divide:

“I wanna tip my bangs to that man in The Voice last week saying nice remarks about me. But I must assure him I don’t have an interesting life at all. I make it all up.”⁵

Making it all up: It was Johnston who, with her casual candor and feminist politics, outed critical writing as a strain of fiction, or at least the beneficiary of a certain invention. (In the early ’70s, Johnston would come out as one of the first openly gay journalists in America.) It was she who made clear that criticism
is not an act of authority, but an act of self-possession. “Life is a rain check to oblivion,” she also wrote. In other words: live-ness is power, our best weapon; our presence in time produces, whether on stage or on the streets, the only real art worth paying attention to.

Years later, Cynthia Carr, who wrote for The Village Voice under the byline “C. Carr” from 1984 to 2003, would bear witness to the fleeting moments before, during and after the downtown New York art and performance scenes were utterly decimated by gentrification, by the eroding of artwork into investment property, and, most horrifically, by AIDS. Carr wrote in vivid, at times livid prose, to guarantee those future histories would always dance before her readers’ eyes: Lydia Lunch (“She came to tell us the end was near. But not near enough.”6), Stelarc (“I was the first one out. Had not wanted a close-up of that horror show of stretched skin”7), the Kipper Kids (“two giant, beefy, baby boys, two pub-crawlers from hell, two pugnacious blokes”8) and so many others. At the end of her preface to her book “On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century,” she remembers those who died — Ethyl Eichelberger, John Sex, Craig Owens — and asks the question “What if the torch can’t be passed?” One answer to this question is that her record of these losses becomes essential, monumental.

A year and a half ago, I became an art columnist at The Village Voice, the home of these two great heroines of criticism. When I think of what these women witnessed, I have worried that I’ve missed the best American culture has to offer. And then I remember: my time is now, as is yours and all of ours. When I attend live performances, when I see what is being imagined and offered, I realize that any wish to be elsewhere is my failure. I remember that any self-respecting, self-possessed critic — just like any self-respecting, self-possessed artist — must stay present and attentive, eyes and mind wide open, pen in hand, to capture and contribute to and revolutionize the here and now, ever unfolding.

2 McCarthy, 9.
3 McCarthy, 134.
5 Johnston, 208.
7 Carr, 10.
8 Carr, 148.
Karin Coonrod “looks for the flash in the actors’ eyes and listens for the music of the audience.” This internationally acclaimed director first staged Shakespeare’s thorny masterpiece in 2016 in its original setting, the Jewish ghetto of Venice. Now she brings her ambitious and wildly inventive production to the U.S. “‘The Merchant of Venice’ is a bloody, exciting play that has an incendiary reputation,” Coonrod said. “Seeing things from a new angle is my challenge.” The new angle in this production? Five actors of different races, nationalities and genders portray Shylock, the iconic Jewish moneylender at the center of the play “to open it up in a way that is both Jewish and universal.”
Livestream Event
Montclair State University Hosts
A Roundtable Conversation
Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg
(Supreme Court of the U.S.) and Shakespeare scholars
David Scott Kastan (Yale University) and
James Shapiro (Columbia University)
discuss “The Merchant of Venice,”
with an introduction and concluding
remarks by Montclair State University scholars
Naomi Liebler and Adam Rzepka.
Saturday, September 23 @ 5 p.m.
Watch live at howlround.tv or on Facebook Live.

Engage!
These events are free and open to the public.

Art & Society
Shakespeare in the Ghetto,
the Ghetto in Shakespeare
Sunday, September 24 @ 1:30 p.m.
School of Communication and Media, Presentation Hall
Shaul Bassi, associate professor of English
and director of the International Center for the
Humanities and Social Change at Ca’ Foscari
University of Venice, is the author of
“Shakespeare’s Italy and Italy’s Shakespeare:
Place, Race, and Politics.” He will discuss the history
and present situation of the ghetto of Venice,
where a cosmopolitan Jewish community
has lived since the early 16th century; the facts
of the ghetto will be compared with Shakespeare’s
fictions to consider parallels, prejudices,
echoes, resonances. Free tickets at peakperfs.org.

Venice as a Metaphor for the World
Tuesday, September 26 @ 6:30 p.m.
Alexander Kasser Theater
Teresa Fiore, Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian American
Studies at Montclair State, leads a discussion with
Karin Coonrod, director of “The Merchant of Venice,” and
Alessandro Cassin, deputy director of Centro Primo Levi
in New York, on otherness, immigration and religion.
Presented in collaboration with the Inserra Chair in Italian
and Italian American Studies. RSVP at montclair.edu/inserra.

Community Conversation
Saturday, September 30, post-performance
Alexander Kasser Theater
Join Karin Coonrod to share reflections and responses
immediately following the performance.

OFCE
DIRECTION Karin Coonrod
ORIGINAL MUSIC Frank London
SCENIC/LIGHTING DESIGN Peter Ksander
COSTUME DESIGN Stefano Nicolao
DRAMATURGY Walter Valeri, Davina Moss

PERFORMERS
Dietrice Bolden, Lynda Gravatt, Toussaint Jeanlouis
Abigail Killeen, Chris McLinden, Linda Powell
Frank Rodriguez, Michael Rogers, Steven Skybell, Paul Spera
Karim Sulayman, Titus Tompkins, Francesca Sarah Toich
Michelle Uranowitz, Sorab Wadia

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Wednesday, September 27 @ 7:30 p.m.
Thursday, September 28 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, September 30 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, October 1 @ 3 p.m.
Two hours, no intermission.

American premiere produced by
Peak Performances @ Montclair State University.

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
AMERICAN PREMIERE
KARIN COONROD
COMPAGNIA DE’ COLOMBARI (USA)

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Shakespeare’s England had little to no Jewish population. Their families had been expelled in 1290 by a royal decree, after two centuries of persecution. They were expelled from France in 1394, from Spain in 1492. We know that Shakespeare wrote “The Merchant of Venice” in the late 1500s, around the time that Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s doctor and one of the few remaining Jews in London, was executed on false charges. The story of the money-lending Jew tricked out of his high-interest loan (something of a trope at the time) had to be set in Venice, the trading center of the Mediterranean; there, Jews were allowed to reside, practice their faith and enjoy the protection of the state, as long as they lived in a separate area — named “ghetto,” after the Venetian word for foundry — which could be closed off with gates and moats in the evening. When outside the ghetto, they had to wear marked clothing. Barred from owning land or joining guilds, they derived their income from selling secondhand items and lending money at interest.

In context, this was both extraordinary liberalism and demonstration of phenomenal power of the state. No one had it very good in medieval Europe, a continent constantly succumbing to epidemics, wars, failed harvests. Venice — a city-state with limited citizen democracy, functioning police and fire-fighting services, special regulations and taxes for each minority, even an ability to guarantee safety to Jews — was a pinnacle of order. Comedy necessitates the rule of law.
The task for anyone staging “The Merchant of Venice” since 1945 is to find a way to its core humanism, its provocative questions of justice and mercy, without succumbing to apologia.
There are some plays that over time, for all their beautiful sentences, complex character psychology and powerful monologues, become like an embarrassing uncle. “The Merchant of Venice” isn’t “Mein Kampf.” It is a comedy, of the sort in which the boy marries the girl, and the boy’s best friend marries the girl’s lady-in-waiting. But the humor of this play, as well as its plot, hinges on the ridiculousness of the idea that a Jewish lender in medieval Europe might get his comeuppance against his gentle client. Shylock appears in five scenes only — and yet has haunted Western culture ever since.

Philip Roth writes, “In the modern world, the Jew has perpetually been on trial [...] and this modern trial of the Jew, this trial which never ends, begins with the trial of Shylock.” The Rev. Henry Hudson, in his preface to the play, published for school use in Boston in 1892, notes offhand that in Shylock, we see “the broad, strong outlines of national character in its most revolting form.” By the 19th century, Shylock was a synonym for greedy Jew in Australian political pamphlets, in books about the Jewish corruption of finance and politics, in the ranting of Ezra Pound. The play was a favorite in Nazi Germany, with more than 50 productions performed there between 1933 and 1939. (Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, in these productions was sometimes made an adopted Aryan child, to solve the problem of her “racially mixed” marriage to Lorenzo.) A performance was commissioned to celebrate that Vienna had become “Jew-free” in 1943. Shylock was played as a monster.

Harold Bloom writes, “I am hurt when I contemplate the real harm Shakespeare has done to the Jews for some four centuries now. No representation of a Jew in literature ever will surpass Shylock in power, negative eloquence and persuasiveness.”

Explicitly anti-Semitic interpretations of the play were a modern invention, and scholars still debate whether the script itself is anti-Semitic and whether Shakespeare, therefore, was an anti-Semite. Shylock is an odd character, bigger and heavier than the comedy surrounding him. It is speculated that Shakespeare attended Lopez’s trial and witnessed its cruelty, that this is why some of the most beautiful monologues in his entire oeuvre belong to Shylock. “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” We always want our literary greats to be equally morally great. But there is no actual evidence that Shakespeare was politically motivated, not in this case.

To read these critics is to be astonished, again and again, at the vast moral and political oversimplifications they trade in, the ways in which they are blind to intermediate shades of responsibility between organized state oppression and individual culpability, the ways in which they ignore the vast work developed among Althusser, Foucault, James Baldwin, Judith Butler. Of course “The Merchant of Venice” is anti-Semitic. It is anti-Semitic in that small, innocent way, the same way in which “Girls” is racist, “Miss Julie” is classist, and “The Iliad” perpetuates rape culture. Its microaggressions are intended as broadly humorous; they were written at a time when it was possible not to take the offense, because all violence looks like jolly jabs when its power is unassailable.

After the Holocaust, it is impossible to enjoy this play innocently. The task for anyone staging “The Merchant of Venice” since 1945 is to find a way to its core humanism, its provocative questions of justice and mercy, without succumbing to apologia. Karin Coonrod embraces this task, with interventions into the tone, structure and staging;

Coonrod gives us Shylock in the bodies of five very different performers, in multiple contemporary and historical languages, so that the “broad, strong outlines of a national character” can disappear in the cacophony of common humanity.

pointing out the motherly relationship of single father Shylock to Jessica; emphasizing the hypocrisy of Portia’s appeal to mercy; zooming in on the losses that abound in this play. Coonrod gives us Shylock in the bodies of five different (very different) performers, in multiple contemporary and historical languages, so that the “broad, strong outlines of a national character” can disappear in the cacophony of common humanity. Theater can do this; film cannot. Amazing what theater can do.

Coonrod’s production was first staged in Venice, in the ghetto itself. It is an odd place, the ghetto, old and not entirely un-cheerful. Walled and canal-ed on all sides, it could only grow upward: today it has some of the tallest residential buildings in Venice, and some of the lowest ceilings. It is cheap and popular with students (the Jewish community has never recovered its prewar numbers). One walks around expecting ghosts at every corner, expecting tragedy. But that is not how the world works. “The Merchant of Venice” is a play that can never be a comedy again, perhaps should not have been a comedy then, yet is a comedy — and its place in the canon is as immovable as the UNESCO-protected bricks in Venetian walls. Learning how to speak with, to and about texts like these is one of the great tasks of our time.
1 The Holocaust could happen in Germany because Central and Eastern Europe were relatively welcoming to Jews, particularly in the 19th century. It is not at all that France or Britain was less anti-Semitic: merely, they had been historically more consistently so. The absence of overt discrimination often hides a history of extermination.

2 What would the Bard have thought of the Rev. Hudson’s preface? How would he have taken the reverend’s assertion that Shakespeare’s female characters are inferior to the male ones, opposing “the false equality of the sexes which has been of late so often and so excruciatingly advocated”?

3 To name just a few. To read these critics, in fact, is to be reminded of how male, white, privileged theater criticism has historically been. Take any woman or person of color to have picked up a pen in the 20th century; chances are they have mentioned something about the power of language and art to oppress us with assumptions of who we are.

4 It is worth noting that one is still allowed to uncritically enjoy “The Iliad.”

“Rather than concentrating the dimensions of Shylock on one actor's interpretation, I opened up the character to five actors of different age, size, race, gender, each actor to play one of the five scenes. The point here is not to ignore Shylock’s Jewishness or to divide his complex character, but to unlock and unveil the common humanity of his being. Shylock the Jew is also Shylock the immigrant, the other, the stranger. My hope is that the audience will find itself in Shylock.”

—KARIN COONROD

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4 It is worth noting that one is still allowed to uncritically enjoy "The Iliad."
In Ashley Fure’s world, all materials are potent and active with lives of their own. We often take things for granted, but Fure does not. She has given them their own voice and consciousness in “The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects.” This wordless drama, created with her architect brother Adam Fure and International Contemporary Ensemble, “probes the animate vitality of matter.” The audience sits beneath a canopy of familiar and exotic objects while performers spur them into action and singers, like the sirens of mythology, shout and whisper warnings, luring the audience into an entirely new way of listening.
Ashley Fure is “one of the finest young composers around.”
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ashley Fure’s “The Force of Things” is co-produced by Peak Performances © Montclair State University with additional generous commitments from the International Contemporary Ensemble: First Page Program, University of Michigan Office of Research, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Dartmouth College Provost’s Office Seed-Funding Program, Miller Theater at Columbia University (NYC) and Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt (IMD). This project was supported by New Music USA, made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from New Music USA project grants. With the friendly support of Ernst von Siemens Musikstiftung.

Dates
Friday, October 6 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, October 7 @ 3 p.m.
Saturday, October 7 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, October 8 @ 3 p.m.
75 minutes, no intermission.

Limited Seating!
The audience will be onstage throughout this performance. For accessibility issues or any seating concerns, contact the box office at 973-655-5112.

COMPOSER Ashley Fure
ARCHITECT Adam Fure
PRODUCER/DESIGNER Ross Karre
ENGINEER Levy Lorenzo
LIGHTING DESIGNER Nicholas Houfek

PERFORMERS
Lucy Dhegrae, VOICE
Dustin Donahue, PERCUSSION
Rebekah Heller, BASSOON
Ross Karre, PERCUSSION
Levy Lorenzo, PERCUSSION
Ryan Muncy, SAXOPHONES
Alice Teyssier, VOICE

www.peakperfs.org
Paper walls rustle and then roar with the sound of thunder—suddenly the room is electrified, vibrating unnaturally.

Audience members turn their eyes upward and search for answers within the canopy of silicon, but this too begins to transform from object to organism, stretching and breathing until its skin is gossamer thin, radiating with light. This sight informs the sound of metal grinding on metal: it scratches eardrums and locks up jaws. Hidden in shadows at the edge of action is a human player cranking at a ratchet, winding in a long length of airplane cable that whips and nearly tears the silicon hide that it pulls. The performer draws a bow over the cable once it is taut, coercing from it the frequencies of a double bass alongside the metallic scream of its internal tension.

Sense memories are stored in the body as an aggregate phenomenon, waiting to be called back into lived experience. How many of these sensations remain hidden from us, buried beneath the sediment of more accessible, easily translatable knowledge? “The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects,” a collaboration between the siblings Ashley and Adam Fure, thrusts us back into their presence. Airplane cable, poured silicon, reverberating subwoofers — aspects of these materials slip under the guise of things that we know well and, in everyday contexts, can easily understand. However, it is in their abnormality that these “things” hold our attention, leading us into a world all their own. That wire flitting across the stage appears to be industrial cable performing its normative role as a tool of conveyance, but also as a tremulous boundary between the audience and the fleshy latex suspended overhead, a menacing weapon and multiphonic instrument. There is a pitched urgency in the grating of the wires against the crank, the anxious way it slaps against the latex. When it finally sings, it sings to us of its agency, its poetic possibility.

Why do forms (signs, symbols, literature, art) exist if not to temporarily seduce and captivate this extraordinary force? Breath, fire, air, spit, intonation, detonation, thunder, bombardment, collapse, explosion: force is inchoate life pushing against the inertia of form. What happens when we depart from that entrenched Western focus on the human-centered desire to be “well known” —
Continued on page 64

A STRANGER

by Dena Beard

at the center of our and society’s understanding? We are left with the primal desire to attend to the infinitely possible worlds that exist just beyond our comprehension. Georges Bataille said of the cave paintings at Lascaux that “the actual doing embodied the

Breath, fire, air, spit, intonation, detonation, thunder, bombardment, collapse, explosion: force is inchoate life pushing against the inertia of form.

entire intention”— in other words, we are not inherently bound to that residue of paint or even to the identity of the painter, but only to the forces that compelled the paintings into being.

“The Force of Things” is not concerned with representation but with actions that approach the limits of the representable. Just as materials change as the result of rising temperatures, and the sound resonates depending on the acoustics of space, so does our perception depend entirely on our condition as embodied subjects in constant dialogue with the worlds that we can and cannot define. The audience sits center stage, surrounded by subwoofers that emit sine waves imperceptible to the human ear. These waves drive the action of the materials onstage, and performers put objects or their hands against the pulsating speakers to produce, to quote Ashley Fure, “thick, incisive textures of morphing polyrhythms,” thereby forcing themselves into the realm of the perceptible. Likewise, the human voice, ordinarily the primary agent of opera, here is a vehicle for breath. Rather than singing forward the action, the performers move throughout the stage, at times obscured by the massive installation-cum-instrument, engaging with the explosive energy of the forces at work.

www.peakperfs.org
In 2007, pianist Simone Dinnerstein rocked the music world with her recording of Bach’s “Goldberg Variations.” She raised the money for the project herself and rented Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall for a concert. Her gamble paid off, with glowing reviews of her “expressive force” and “timeless, meditative, utterly audacious solo debut.” Now ready for a new challenge, Dinnerstein wanted to match the music with movement, so it was time to roll the dice again. She proposed her project to acclaimed choreographer Pam Tanowitz. Both women were intimidated by the challenge of reinterpreting Bach’s towering, beloved classic, but they decided their hesitation was the exact reason to proceed. “Working together we’ll invent our own world,” Tanowitz decided, “and create something inherently dangerous for both of us as artists.” The result is “New Work for Goldberg Variations,” with Dinnerstein center stage at the piano in expressive dialogue with the dancers moving all around her to Bach’s glorious music.
“New Work for Goldberg Variations” was commissioned by Duke Performances/Duke University and Peak Performances @ Montclair State University, co-commissioned by Opening Nights Performing Arts/Florida State University and Summer Stages Dance at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, and received creative development support from the Maggie Alleeve National Center for Choreography (MANCC) at Florida State University, The Yard at Martha's Vineyard, the NYU Center for Ballet and the Arts, New York City Center and Peak Performances @ Montclair State University.

“New Work for Goldberg Variations” was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project, with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. General operating support for Pam Tanowitz Dance was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

MUSIC J.S. Bach | “Goldberg Variations,” BWV 988

CHOREOGRAPHY Pam Tanowitz

PIANO Simone Dinnerstein

SCENERY/LIGHTING Davison Scandrett

COSTUMES Reid & Harriet

PRODUCER Aaron Mattocks

PERFORMERS
Maggie Cloud, Jason Collins
Christine Flores, Lindsey Jones, Maile Okamura
Melissa Toogood, Netta Yerushalmy

Dates
Thursday, October 19 @ 7:30 p.m.
Friday, October 20 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, October 21 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, October 22 @ 3 p.m.
75 minutes, no intermission.

Engage!

This event is free and open to the public.

Sneak Peek
Thursday, October 19 @ 6 p.m.
Alexander Kasser Theater, Studio 104

Reinvention is the watchword for pianist Simone Dinnerstein and choreographer Pam Tanowitz as they interpret one of Bach’s seminal compositions, the “Goldberg Variations.” Join us for an informal pre-show talk on the musical source of their inspiration. Moderated by Marissa Silverman, associate professor in the John J. Cali School of Music. Guests to be announced on peakperfs.org.
The choreographer Pam Tanowitz has a rich history of seeking out and working with musicians. But in this case, it was the pianist Simone Dinnerstein who approached Tanowitz for a collaboration that will eventually yield an evening-length dance to Johann Sebastian Bach's “Goldberg Variations.” The interdisciplinary artist Larissa Velez-Jackson sat down with them mid-process to discuss how this project has come together.

Larissa Velez-Jackson: Pam, you’ve talked about how you treat music in different ways inside of a work, whether to go with, go against or ignore it altogether. While I was listening to a recording of “Goldberg Variations,” particularly the first aria into Variation 1, I just grinned ear to ear with empathy for your task.

Pam Tanowitz: I haven’t choreographed the aria yet. I’m saving that for last; it’s so gorgeous I don’t know what to do. My first reaction to the possibility of “Goldberg Variations” was no: I can’t tackle that. That’s too big. But then I thought maybe that’s the exact reason I should try.

LVJ: It’s such divinely monumental music. I’d love for you both to talk about exactly what it means for a choreographer to tackle this piece and for a musician to come face to face with it.

Simone Dinnerstein: One of the things that’s different about this is that it’s a collaboration. It’s not just that Pam is taking an abstract performance and thinking about how she feels the dance should be to that music. It’s also about my particular interpretation of this music and how that is going to relate to the way Pam thinks about movement.

PT: I don’t read music, and Simone has lived with this score way longer than I have. So she also talks to me about it: what’s going on in the score, what’s going on inside of her approach, all this is part of the project. It’s not like I could have any pianist come play; the choreography is very specifically based on how Simone plays. I go periodically to the library and checkout the video of Jerry Robbins’s “Goldberg Variations” [which premiered at New York City Ballet in 1971]. The playing is so different from what Simone is doing. Her approach is so much more danceable! So much more open and fluid; I don’t know if I could make a dance to another version, actually.

LVJ: So in a way, Simone’s interpretation is like a map.
PT: Most definitely.

SD: And the thing about live music, of course, is that it’s never the same.

PT: Dancing’s never the same, either. Even though the dancers have the same steps, they never execute them the same.

SD: But if you’re using recorded music, the tempo has to be the same. And with us, it’s open. It could very well be that the dancers will be in a different spot at a different time than they were the previous day.

LVJ: Like, a really different spot?

PT: It depends on which variation. There are rules, internally, but it’s also loose, which is what gives breath and life to it.

SD: It’s generally the same, but I will take time in different places. I had an experience of playing the Robbins ballet, and I was not allowed by the directors to do that at all. They wanted me to play it exactly the same way each night. I didn’t actually follow that so much.

LVJ: Do you find in this case, Simone, that you can even watch and wait with what the dancers are doing, and really respond?

SD: Yes, I do that.

PT: Simone’s very much a part of the dance. The more I talked to the lighting designer, Davison Scandrett, who’s been my collaborator for a while, the more we saw that the design all comes from the piano. The piano is the design element.

SD: The lid is a big problem, in terms of being able to see. So in the end we thought, OK, we’ll take the lid off altogether. Which is something that never happens in concerts because acoustically, then, the sound is going directly up into the air as opposed to pushing out toward the audience. However, visually it’s much better. And you know what? This has started affecting me playing in traditional concerts. I’m starting to experiment with taking the lid off, so I can see the orchestra.

PT: Love it.

LVJ: The piano is in the center, not off to the side, and not down here [in the orchestra pit], and the dancers create a circle around it — so there are all these things that are nontraditional, or atypical ways of looking at this relationship between you.

PT: Absolutely. If the “Goldberg Variations” is the piano, we have to put it in the center. If it fails, it will be a good failure. It’s really challenging compositionally to make this not always look like it’s going around the piano in a circle. It’s amazing that we have this two-week residency in July at Montclair, so we can really figure this out, instead of having two days in the theater and rushing.

LVJ: When I watched rehearsal footage from your residency at MANCC [the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography] at Florida State University, it became clear that there were things that were surprising to you both in the ways that you work —

SD: Yeah, I was very surprised about the lack of counting. [laughs] I liked very much that things weren’t exact because I also play with a freer sense of rhythm. I was also surprised by the dancers, how they interacted; Pam always was really open to hearing their ideas. There was almost an element of improvisation that develops into the choreography.

PT: It’s based on the vocabulary that’s already in place; within that vocabulary dancers are making their own choices sometimes.

SD: This is only my second experience working with dancers. The first was with the Paris Opera Ballet —

PT: It’s safe to say that we’re totally opposite.

LVJ: The lack of counting, the freedom to be continually changing the parameters around what exactly the work is, the dancers’ role as collaborators — those are all strong tenets of postmodernism. For me, these tenets have the possibility to create more positive human interactions and foster deeper connections between the players inside of a work. I’m thinking of a particular humanist politic versus a more traditional, dictatorial setup where there’s the leader who tells people what to do. I think postmodernism can often be interpreted as being other, and formal, and difficult for audiences. But I actually see it as way more democratic. I think collaboration itself is a feminist practice. I don’t know whether you’d call it downtown dance or more experimental contemporary dance, but it’s a woman-dominated field in terms of the people who are practitioners. A lot of these progressive ethics and politics are embedded inside of their work, in ways that don’t get talked about.
PT: At MANCC, Simone would say, “Why don’t you try these steps with this variation?” Or I would say, “I’m not really sure what to do with this,” and she would suggest something. It was all very organic and in the moment, which is really exciting.

LVJ: You’re choreographing it together, at that point. This is positive human interaction!

[laughter]

SD: It’s interesting to me also how much the dancers remember, that they take in all of these variations and permutations and rearrangements.

PT: It’s a physical memory, the way you —

SD: Yeah, but I couldn’t learn that way. That’s like learning by ear. And they’re learning really complicated stuff that way.

LVJ: Completely committed to memory. It’s very beautiful. My understanding, too, is that each dancer has a tool for how to remember, and it’s very personal and specific. It could be around building a bit of a narrative, or it could be image-based. And it gets linked —

PT: You’re absolutely right. We have a part where Lindsey Jones sits behind Simone, so they’re back to back, and she’s mimicking Simone’s hands with her feet. If you pulled her out, she would tell you a whole story. Whereas with other dancers, it might be more about the steps, or the rhythms. The challenge for the dancers, and the challenge for me, actually, is how the piece is from beginning to end. What is their subtext? And physically how are they going to get through a 70-minute —

SD: It’s more than that.

PT: Well, we’re not doing all the repeats.

LVJ: Are you doing the complete piece?

SD: All the variations, but not all the repeats. With some, there’s less difference when you repeat, and so it’s OK to remove them. Some are slower, so you don’t need to repeat because it’s already been a long time. In others the music changes enough in the repeat that it changes the structure of the whole variation.

LVJ: I just keep thinking about the density of the music. And that’s also a strength of your work, Pam: it’s really formally dense — you’re able to draw from classical style and form and vocabulary to create endless permutations. In coming together with this piece of music that is itself so dense and historical and rich, what has that dialogue or tension been like, between you?

PT: When I push against something traditional, I actually feel more freedom than when I have total freedom. So that tension is me pushing up against this history, this music, this, you know, everything. “Goldberg Variations” is in everybody’s life — people have their own relationship to it as well.

SD: When Pam and I first started talking about the “Goldbergs,” she was very interested in the historical aspect of it — the ornate baroque nature of it. But I didn’t think we should go there. That’s never been what’s driven me with the music. I’m not interested in period performance practice or knowing what Bach was experiencing in his life when he wrote the piece; it’s the music itself that’s interesting, the way that it lives right now, the form of it, the phrasing, the more abstract nature of the music. And so that’s what we’ve done.

PT: It was really exciting when she said the music was abstract. To think of the music in terms of abstraction opened it up. I hadn’t really thought about it as abstract, but rather, OK, all these variations. Is that when I called you, scared? She had to talk me off a cliff last summer.

LVJ: And is that what brought you to this piece of music? As something that you’ve invested in?

SD: This is really what draws me to all classical music, or art music, up through contemporary music. This is not how many of my colleagues think about music. They’re often obsessed with the historical side of it and understanding the performance tradition of a given piece, researching what kinds of strings were used by the violins at that time or how did people ornament during Bach’s time, when they add little trills and things. I’ve always been of course interested in knowing as much as possible, but I don’t think the power of the music has anything to do with knowing the background of it.

LVJ: Do you feel that’s what allows your interpretations to take on a more expressive quality — for you to invest yourself more personally or freely?
SD: I think … interpretation is entirely imagined, so people that say that their interpretations are informed by historical performance practice are imagining that, right?

[laughter]

SD: Sometimes people get upset by my interpretations because they think that I am either oblivious or ignorant to certain things in the music. But I’ve made very conscious, informed choices about how I’m going to interpret a piece of music. Sometimes that means that what comes out might actually be quite different than how it is normally played. Sometimes what comes out is not that dissimilar.

PT: You’re postmodern, baby.

[laughter]

LVJ: I felt like this was what I was seeing in the MANCC video: there is a very specific approach that you’re both taking in your craft, and who knew that there’s actually such a beautiful overlap there? Now I wonder if that will be the case in this whole performance season that is centered around women —

“It’s the music itself that’s interesting, the way that it lives right now, the form of it, the phrasing, the more abstract nature of music.” —SIMONE DINNERSTEIN

PT: Which we didn’t know about when we came to Jed [Jed Wheeler, of Peak Performances] and it was all booked like a year and a half ago.

LVJ: It’s a beautiful mission. There’s a specific quote from him, addressing the “slow parity of gender.”

SD: I constantly have people saying that my playing is very feminine. I think that feminine to them means more soft-spoken. Usually my tempi are a bit slower; it’s maybe more emotional. I don’t know. I would never describe something as being feminine or masculine — those concepts don’t exist anymore. My son, who is 15, would never use those words.

PT: My daughter is all over that stuff, too. I have such high hopes for this generation of kids; they are so present and open and engaged in the world.

LVJ: When I hear the slower aspects in “Goldberg Variations,” I feel like this is the definition of human longing. Or God comes up. And I always love when there’s that reveling in really taking time with the music. So to say, just because you’re a woman “that’s a feminine interpretation” is so lame.

SD: I mean, it was written by a man, so what does that say?

LVJ: What about for you, Pam?

PT: For me, it’s all about the work. Of course I know that I’m a woman, but the themes that I work with are important to dance and dance history. I’m a female choreographer trying to make interesting dance in 2017. At the same time, I feel it is hard for women because people are more apt to cultivate male choreographers. That’s just a fact.

I think what’s always been really important to me is pushing myself, making sure I stay true to the dance and the work that I’m making. I’ve been making work for the last 25 years. You have to love it. You have to be committed to it. You have to determine what you want your work to be. You have to be in it for the long haul.

SD: I also think, any project I’ve done where I’ve collaborated only with women has definitely felt quite different than when I collaborate with men. I like both, but I think there’s something really special about working with another woman. There’s a different give and take. We’re brought up to be much more interactive with each other, in our generation at least. There’s no mansplaining. [laughter]
Once upon a time in Sicily, there were seven sisters who lived in Palermo. An untimely death plunges the sisters into their own divine tragedy, this one created by Emma Dante, a ferocious Sicilian theater artist and award-winning writer, actor, producer and director of plays, operas and films. In her raucous, poetic fable, these vibrant, funny sisters are as likely to throw shoes or crucifixes at one another as they are to share secrets. They command the stage, quarrelling and reminiscing, in this empathetic and uncompromising look at the chains of family and tradition.
Engage!

These events are free and open to the public.

Sicily as a Theater of the World

Wednesday, November 15 @ 6:30 p.m.
Feliciano School of Business, Lecture Hall 101
Director Emma Dante in conversation with Teresa Fiore, Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian American Studies at Montclair State.
RSVP at montclair.edu/inserra.

Community Conversation
Saturday, November 18, post-performance
Alexander Kasser Theater
Join director Emma Dante and “Le Sorelle Macaluso” company members to share reflections and responses immediately following the performance.

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The impalpable partition between light and darkness, the rim of the bed morphing into a trampoline to jump into the void, the invisible edge where the sea meets the sand: Emma Dante’s “Le Sorelle Macaluso” (“The Macaluso Sisters,” 2014) asks us to see borders, to see how they provoke sparks and then inexorably dissolve. In theater, film, fiction, opera and children’s stories, her artistic vision is about discerning and standing over these boundaries, not so much as an act of defiance but as a gesture of creative questioning. Sicily, the (is)land she is from, is a lush source of inspiration for her art: a place between geographies and civilizations, a light-filled space replete with shadows, a baroque corner plagued by paucity.

BY TERESA FIORE
almost impenetrable, Southern dialects. Hers is not a macabre dance with death, but a simultaneously gentle and devastating pas de deux. “Le Sorelle” was inspired by a story Dante heard from a friend. One night his deliriously ill grandmother screamed out to her daughter: “Ultimately, am I alive or dead?”

The daughter replied: “Alive! You are alive, Mom!” And the grandmother sardonically retorted: “Alive, sure . . . I have been dead for a while, and none of you tells me so as not to scare me.” Dante takes the story to another dimension, since being alive is an equally scary prospect for some of the dispossessed characters of her play.

Dante describes her work as a theater of poetry, not of provocation, despite its iconoclastic quality. It has become her signature to place her actors in a row facing the audience, beginning with “mPalermu” (“In Palermo,” 2001), which launched her as a revolutionary voice in Italian theater. This compositional solution literally creates another boundary, giving flesh to the separation between stage and audience, and allowing Dante to give shape and color to her vision with a blend of the sacred and the ordinary: her characters stand along the proscenium as if it were the Day of Judgment or the front of a street parade. A skilled costume designer, she privileges simple yet extremely symbolic attires, which the actors slip into and out of onstage to remind us of yet another threshold, that between the public role and the condition of the soul that is ultimately “ignuda” (naked), as Pirandello would have said. In “Le Sorelle” Dante chooses the black clothes of the funeral and lets them burst into colorful summer dresses and then bathing suits for the sisters, while the father puts on a displacing negligee with masculine prowess; the young nephew Davidù wears Maradona’s soccer uniform (a silent homage to Davide Enia, another spellbinding Sicilian writer), and one of the sisters, Maria, dons the gifts of nature as she frames the entire play through her dances with death. Or is it life? Or is it just love?

Perhaps the answer lies in the lyrics the sisters sing to please their father: “Si tu mori / Vogghiu muriri / Nsieme a tiia!” They come from a classic Sicilian tune, “The Swordfish,” made

Emma Dante is an artist who persistently embraces contradictions and illuminates divisions, the better to subvert them.

The vitality of Dante’s art stems from repeated encounters with death, punctuated by tragic rhythms and comic flurries, channeled through hyper-communicative bodies and dense,
famous by Domenico Modugno. In it, a male swordfish decides to be trapped by the fishermen who have killed his beloved: “If you die, I want to die with you.” The ultimate desire may be to die with the dead or, as in the case of “Le Sorelle,” to live with them in a dream pregnant with the South.

Dante’s aesthetic and narrative choices are glorified or vilified for being obsessively Sicilian and, by extension, Southern. Yet her references to the South can be ephemeral, almost encoded, like the cassatella in “mPalermu” or, as in “Le Sorelle,” the puppet opera’s duels, which briefly capture the theatricality of the struggle for life before turning into props (a line of cross-marked shields looking like a religious boundary). The quintessential element that explains the autochthonous nature of her work (also imbued in her company’s name, South Western Coast) undoubtedly remains her linguistic palette. Thick accents, ancestral words, local expressions, ritualistic repetitions, quotations from the folk tradition: a dream and nightmare for Montclair State University student Marta Russoniello, my colleague Dr. Marisa Trubiano and myself as we surtitled her work, recognizing the intrinsic inadequacy of our rendition. “Le Sorelle” will make those titles simultaneously necessary and unnecessary; at times Dante’s language transcends concrete meaning and becomes pure sound.

This will be Emma Dante’s first time in the United States (her work traveled here once, without her). Represented for too long as an enfant terrible in a country like Italy that considers even 40-year-olds still unripe, she is now demonstrating a coherence of vision across several forms and genres — and combines a profound gender consciousness with the seasoned legacy of male maestri, ranging from Antonin Artaud to Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. Yet when I approached her to discuss the theme of women in theater, she was reluctant to frame her work from this perspective despite some of her statements about women’s exclusion — a typical move from an artist who persistently embraces contradictions and illuminates divisions, the better to subvert them.

“Le Sorelle” brings to a summa Dante’s exploration of the blurring of genders, the blending of sorrow and joy, and the dialogue between tragedy and comedy in its intense and refined treatment of family and death.
Known worldwide for its passionate musicality, impressive technique and expansive repertoire, the Shanghai Quartet melds traditional Chinese folk music, masterpieces of Western musical literature and cutting-edge contemporary works. This renowned quartet continues its tradition of expanding the musical palette of its audiences by introducing Yiwen Lu, acclaimed young master of the erhu, a two-stringed instrument whose versatile, expressive tone is an essential element of Chinese folk music and culture. Lu’s virtuosity allows her to blend techniques and styles — modern and traditional, Eastern and Western — defying expectations for this “simple” instrument.
quartet with yiwen lu, erhu

Shanghai Quartet
Weigang Li, Violin Yi-Wen Jiang, Violin
Honggang Li, Viola Nicholas Tzavaras, Cello

Dates
Saturday, December 16 @ 8 p.m.
90 minutes, including one intermission.

Program

String Quartet No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op.12 Felix Mendelssohn

“Little Cabbage,” for String Quartet and Erhu Wen Deqing

Chinese Folk Songs for String Quartet and Erhu Traditional, arr. Yi-Wen Jiang

“Reflection of the Moon in Erquan Fountain”
“Yao Dance”

“Agony” Liu Tianhua

“Bird Calls in the Mountain Valley” Liu Tianhua

Erhu Capriccio No.5, for String Quartet and Erhu George Gao

Fiddle Suite for String Quartet and Erhu Chen Yi

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The erhu virtuoso Yiwen Lu describes her playing style with the phrase “a hundred rivers in one sea” — a Chinese saying that refers to multiple elements flowing smoothly together to create a larger, holistic entity.

It is a wonderfully appropriate expression, not only because it succinctly describes the way Lu mixes traditional and modern techniques in her playing, but also because the erhu’s role as a cultural symbol of China is the fortuitous result of multicultural influences mixing with accidents of history.

Although Western audiences primarily know the erhu from concert stages, it’s still embedded in the Chinese cultural consciousness as a folk instrument. For most of its thousand-year history in China it was called “the beggar’s instrument,” as it was typically seen in the hands of street musicians, often blind and left to ply only this particular trade. To this day, even in large cities like Shanghai, a few itinerant musicians can be seen playing the melancholy tunes for which the erhu is famous.

The instrument’s humble background directly relates to its origins as a barbarian import: it was brought over by nomadic people from the north of China and spread among the lower classes. Along with its light and portable body, the erhu’s versatile and expressive tone — with its ability to imitate the human voice, birdsong and even the neighing of horses — made it an invaluable addition to folk operas and narrative folk songs.

The snobbery of the privileged classes limited the erhu’s reach, but also helped insulate it from China’s many political
and cultural upheavals. Unlike instruments such as the konghou harp, which went extinct in the Ming Dynasty after it went out of fashion among the elites, the erhu was regularly played among the peasant classes, developing a repertoire that focused on their stories and experiences.

This repertoire is the backbone of the erhu and was preserved even as the erhu itself was modernized in the early 20th century. Liu Tianhua, a musician and composer with a love for Chinese music, elevated the instrument to the concert stage as China was beginning to shed its feudal system and as the elite classes believed that modernization could only occur through absorbing Western principles. Liu adapted Western classical performance techniques, aesthetics and compositions for the erhu, pushing it forward as a solo instrument.

The erhu enjoyed further recognition at the establishment of the Communist government in 1949, which lauded the erhu both as a voice of the common people and as an example of how Chinese culture could be modernized. Although the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, which saw the shutting down of schools and institutions, put a pause on the erhu’s exposure to concert stages, it continued to be enjoyed among the proletarian classes.

Although Western audiences primarily know the erhu from concert stages, it’s still embedded in the Chinese cultural consciousness as a folk instrument.
After the Cultural Revolution ended in the 1970s, the reopening of Western-style music conservatories led to the creation of a pool of trained musicians who specialized in the erhu, blending various regional melodies with complex rhythms and the use of artificial scales.

As capitalism has pressured more Chinese men to work instead of study the arts, Chinese conservatories have increasingly produced more female graduates, and with the erhu detached from its lower-class roots and placed into an academic context, more women have begun to play the instrument. Many of the erhu’s most acclaimed virtuosos are women, including Min Huifen, called “the Queen of Erhu” and a mentor to Yiwen Lu.

Like Min, Lu is a product of conservatory training; she began studying at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music at age 9 after winning a national competition and eventually completed her master’s degree there. The conservatory’s influences run deep in her playing, which retains a mixture of traditional and modern techniques — although Lu also layers foreign influences and her own experimentalism on this foundation to create her bold and distinct signature.

In Lu’s opinion, the erhu’s trajectory toward the concert stage is what makes it an excellent symbol of Chinese culture: “I think the erhu epitomizes how Chinese music modernized in the 20th century.” She points out that the erhu is still developing, with composers and performers challenging themselves to produce new ways of blending the traditional with the experimental.

Lu’s progressive approach to the erhu mirrors the general attitude toward Western classical and traditional music in China, although there are a few critical voices. Despite being known for his own experimentalism, the Paris-based erhu great Guo Gan believes that young erhu players in China risk losing the erhu’s unique identity if they focus only on mastering Western artistic expressions. In an interview with Cerise Press in 2010, Guo cautioned players to preserve what is original and distinctly Chinese about the erhu’s sound.

Guo has a pessimistic view of the erhu’s future, saying that mainstream Chinese culture has moved on without it, citing the problems of Westernization and commercialism. Lu is more optimistic; as a child, she fell in love with the erhu after hearing its music, and she believes that the unique sound will continue to draw learners. “It’s true that many more people are learning Western music in China than before, but there are still significant numbers of young people enrolling in traditional music programs in schools and universities.”

Lu also doesn’t think that the erhu is in danger of becoming a rarefied instrument played only by conservatory graduates. “The folk music tradition is still strong in China,” she says, adding that even outside of the conservatory world, “there will always be people who have a love for the erhu’s traditional heritage and sound.”
Engage!
Enhance your experience at Peak Performances.

The cultural engagement program of the Office of Arts and Cultural Programming (ACP) at Montclair State University involves both on- and off-campus communities in creative and intellectually stimulating education events that connect audiences with the work of artists from around the globe.

“What if students have the opportunity to not only read literary work but also discuss it with its creators? Evidence suggests that a campus community that encourages literary engagement and attendance at live performance events privileges a culture of empathy and social intelligence, qualities sorely needed for students to succeed both in work and in life. For this reason, the collaboration between the Department of Writing Studies' Live Literature reading series and Peak Performances is a vital part of the First-Year Writing Program.” —Carrie O'Dell, Instructional Specialist, Dept. of Writing Studies

Discussions
Be curious! Ask a question, get an insider's view, learn the story behind the story at sessions of our discussion series. Free and open to all.

Community Conversations
Audiences and artists come together to share reflections and responses immediately following select Saturday evening performances.

Sneak Peeks
Good conversation goes with good food on select Thursdays (starting at 6 p.m.) as artists, writers and thinkers offer insight and behind-the-scenes looks into our exciting productions.

Art & Society
This series explores the vital role of the arts in illuminating contemporary social and political issues.
Campus Collaborations
ACP collaborates with faculty and staff to connect Peak Performances to co-curricular programs in all colleges of the university. Peak Performances artists participate in discussions, workshops and master classes that support teaching and learning across academic disciplines. Partnerships with campus-based programs — such as the Live Literature reading series, curated by the First-Year Writing Program, and Films and Filmmakers, an initiative of the Film Institute at Montclair State — pair academic content with themes from events in the Peak Performances series. ACP has partnered with Montclair State’s Institute for the Humanities to develop curriculum-related workshops for high school teachers; developed a series of annual State of the Arts lectures; created symposia around themes connected to the work onstage; and matched students with rare opportunities to work alongside the artists in the series.

Creative Thinking
A signature initiative, the Creative Thinking project is an interdisciplinary course based on the core premise that it is possible to develop tools and approaches to foster innovative thinking. Guest artists and thinkers collaborate with course faculty to lead the class in hands-on activities designed to help students synthesize an experiential and theoretical understanding of creative processes across disciplines.

“It’s extremely important for us to be able to communicate with professionals who are doing what we aspire to do; it’s what we’re in school for! I’m really happy that I’ve been able to take advantage of that while I’m here.”
—Music composition student, John J. Cali School of Music

Artists in Residence
PeARL: Performing Arts Research Laboratory
The PeARL initiative provides innovative artists with the resources to create a work during an extended residency on the Montclair State campus. The selected artists open their process in an exchange with students, faculty and staff through discussions, lectures, workshops and open rehearsals. Turn to page 41 to learn more about PeARL.

Visit peakperfs.org for the complete schedule of cultural engagement events. Look for “Engage!” in this brochure to denote upcoming events.
Engage!
Symposium: Women Innovators in the Performing Arts

Wednesday, March 28, 2018
Montclair State University

In recognition of Women’s History Month and in conjunction with Peak Performances’ season of works created by women, join the Office of Arts and Cultural Programming at Montclair State University for a day of discussions with artists, feminists and scholars on the topic of Women Innovators in the Performing Arts, curated by Baraka Sele and Marissa Silverman.

Visit peakperfs.org for updates and details.

Baraka Sele, an independent consultant, has been the assistant vice president of programming at New Jersey Performing Arts Center, artistic director of performing arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and vice president of performing arts of the Houston International Festival. In addition to working as a performing arts curator, consultant and producer, Sele has served on local, national and international advisory committees, boards and panels for organizations including Dance/USA, Dance/NYC, Association of Performing Arts Presenters, International Society for the Performing Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Vera List Center for Art and Politics/The New School and Walker Art Center’s Global Advisory Committee. She has traveled throughout Africa, Asia, Europe and North and South America and is frequently a guest speaker at conferences, seminars and universities. Her work and presentations have been featured in numerous publications.

Marissa Silverman is an associate professor and coordinator of undergraduate music education at the John J. Cali School of Music, Montclair State University. A Fulbright Scholar, Dr. Silverman has published in many academic journals in the U.S. and abroad as well as The New York Times. Dr. Silverman is co-author of “Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education,” second edition, and co-editor of “Community Music Today” and “Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility and Ethical Praxis.” Her recent publications include invited chapters in “The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Music Education,” “The Oxford Handbook of Music Education; Music, Health and Wellbeing” and “Music Education: Navigating the Future.” Her research interests include the philosophy of music and music education; ethics, music and music education; community music; artistic interpretation; and interdisciplinary curriculum development. She holds a Ph.D. in performance (flute) from New York University, as well as degrees in English literature and education.
I have produced, presented and supported artists in dance, music, opera, theater, performance and all combinations thereof since 1976. And through my gritty experience, I say that I live now in an abundant age of creative endeavor (smarmy politics aside). Looking every which way, I find smart performances testing conventional wisdom and landing strong proof that new ideas are the best ideas. Yet I must ask: Who are and who will be the audiences for these super-duper protean artists?

Making new work is hard work. Contemporary explorations need extended periods of experimentation and copious infusions of financial resources — both of which are in short supply in these remarkable days of discoveries.

The Performing Arts Research Lab (PeARL) targets both issues: How do artists of considerable imagination realize their ideas without compromise, and how do audiences come to appreciate new performing arts ideas as personal resources in achieving continuity in daily life? The program takes a long view of making work that instills lasting audience curiosity.

Is it possible to support artists and build audiences in tandem? I believe so, and that the time and space artists need to realize new work is the same time and space that audiences need to understand and appreciate this work — not in a thumbs up, thumbs down sort of way, but in the good old liberal arts sense of learning to think for ourselves. For all of us, contemporary performance can be a purposeful means of lifelong self-discovery.

PeARL’s debut residency ran September 2015 through March 2017: 19 months from scratch to performance. Composer-librettist Amy Beth Kirsten, director-designer Mark DeChiazza and the performance ensemble HOWL started in our studio with little prewritten material and ended up on our Alexander Kasser Theater stage with the chamber opera “Quixote.” Students from across
Montclair State University (students of language, history, biology, anthropology and even the performing arts) were given access to this work, so as to understand the adaptive creative process that is the signature mindset of artists who grasp what we do not — or not yet!

Kirsten summarized her PeARL experience beautifully:

“Over the course of our six workshop weeks spanning nearly two seasons, I’ve been drafting, developing and editing the music with HOWL to test and challenge physical limits, to experiment with vocalizations, to discover how we might transform books and paper into musical instruments — all for the purpose of getting to the heart of Don Quixote, the real leader of this project.

“Without the physical space, support, infrastructure and especially the extended development time frame that the PeARL residency afforded us, this adventure would not have been possible.”

Dr. Linda Gould Levine, professor emerita of Spanish at Montclair State, introduced graduate students to the creative possibilities of “Quixote” and offered her own endorsement: “It was particularly rewarding to have the opportunity to attend several of the rehearsals of the work and witness its evolution over the 19-month residency of ‘Quixote’ at Montclair State University. From its first moments in the bare room on the ground floor of Kasser to its explosive force in the wide expanse of the theater, this work redefined Cervantes’s novel.”

How do artists of considerable imagination realize their ideas without compromise, and how do audiences come to appreciate new performing arts ideas as personal resources in achieving continuity in daily life?
The 2017-19 PeARL residency artist will be Faye Driscoll, a recipient of a 2016 Doris Duke Award. An artist whose notion of a show is “perceptual disorientation,” she challenges her audience to accept the normality of blatant abnormality. Her newest work is the third segment of her “Thank You for Coming” trilogy, which includes “Play” (2016) and “Attendance” (2014), in which Driscoll considers multidisciplinary performance as a political act shared by performer and viewer, who co-create reality.

Presenters must lean into gender inequity with a cultural call to arms and underwrite the brilliant individuals who imagine what performance will be before we see it ourselves. How thrilling to set in motion a new work that will find momentum through sustained interaction of artists, students and audiences … a perfect project for PeARL!

**Announcing the next PeARL artist in residence**

**FAYE DRISCOLL** is a Bessie Award-winning performance maker who has been called a “startlingly original talent” by The New York Times. “Thank You for Coming” is the umbrella title for a series of works that Driscoll began creating in 2012 that will culminate in 2020. Each distinct work in the series desires to extend the sphere of influence of performance to create a communal space where the co-emergent social moment is questioned, heightened and palpable. Driscoll’s work has been presented at venues such as the Wexner Center for the Arts, Walker Art Center, Institute for Contemporary Art/Boston, Museum of Contemporary Art/Chicago, Wesleyan University, Danspace Project, The Kitchen, American Dance Festival and many major international venues. Her work was exhibited in “Younger Than Jesus” at the New Museum and included in NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial, the first biennial at the Museum of Arts and Design. Driscoll has collaborated with theater and performance artists such as Young Jean Lee, Cynthia Hopkins, Taylor Mac, Jennifer Miller and the National Theater of the United States of America. She recently choreographed for a new film by Josephine Decker. Driscoll has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Creative Capital award, a NEFA National Dance Project, Production Residencies for Dance Grant, a French-U.S. Exchange in Dance Grant and a Foundation for Contemporary Art Grant. She has also been funded by the MAP Fund, New York State Council on the Arts, Jerome Foundation, Greenwall Foundation and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. She is a grateful recipient of a 2016 Doris Duke Artist Award and a 2016 USA Doris Duke Fellowship.
Award-winning choreographer and TED Fellow Camille A. Brown brings her company and its irresistible energy to Peak Performances. “ink,” the final installation of her dance trilogy about culture, race and identity, celebrates the rituals, gestural vocabulary and traditions of the African diaspora. Using the rhythms and sounds of traditional African music mixed with blues, hip-hop, jazz and swing, “ink” travels through time from the abolitionist movement to the civil rights struggle, from the Black Power movement to the emergence of hip-hop. Brown’s choreographic gifts and her inherent theatricality and musicality are tools that shape our understanding of the African-American experience.

Maleek Washington, Juel D. Lane and Timothy Edwards in rehearsal for “ink.” Photo by Gennadi Novash
Dates
Thursday, February 1 @ 7:30 p.m.
Friday, February 2 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, February 3 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, February 4 @ 3 p.m.

Engage!
This event is free and open to the public.

Community Conversation
Saturday, February 3, post-performance
Alexander Kasser Theater
Join choreographer Camille A. Brown and the company of “ink” to continue the dialogue about identity initiated through the performance.

READ JESSICA LYNNE’S ESSAY INSPIRED IN PART BY CAMILLE A. BROWN’S WORK ON PAGE 54.
In 2016, Stacy Klein and her Double Edge Theatre dazzled Peak audiences with their acclaimed, kaleidoscopic “The Grand Parade (of the 20th Century).” They return in 2018 with the world premiere of “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro,” a fantasia on the relationship between two remarkable artists: the Mexican painter, writer and feminist Leonora Carrington and the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky. Drawing on the music, dance and magic realism of Latin American culture, Double Edge’s new project promises to be challenging, provocative and beautiful.

“Double Edge integrates dance, circus, masque, puppetry, multimedia, live music and elements inspired by Argentine Carnival to create theatrical events that are […] vividly experiential.”—THE BOSTON GLOBE
CREATOR/DIRECTOR Stacy Klein
CO-CREATORS/ACTORS Adam Bright, Matthew Glassman, Jennifer Johnson, Carlos Uriona
DOUBLE EDGE ENSEMBLE Evan Barth, Travis Coe, Hannah Jarrell, Amanda Miller

Dates
Saturday, March 17 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, March 18 @ 3 p.m.
Thursday, March 22 @ 7:30 p.m.
Friday, March 23 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, March 24 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, March 25 @ 3 p.m.
60 minutes, no intermission.

“QUIETLY ASTOUNDING”
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

Engage!
These events are free and open to the public.

Meet the Company
Immediately following each performance
Alexander Kasser Theater Lobby
Double Edge Theatre and Peak Performances invite you to join the ensemble of “Leonora and Alejandro” in the lobby after the performance for an informal gathering of conversation and light refreshments.

Co-produced by Peak Performances @ Montclair State University.

“Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro” was developed in part at the Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University.

www.peakperfs.org
Today, 100 years after her birth in Lancashire, England, and six after her death in Mexico City, one can imagine a future in which the Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington is no longer relegated to a secondary mention in the compendia of the movement.

In 2014, Sotheby’s sold one of her paintings for $2.6 million. In 2015, a Tate Liverpool retrospective reintroduced her to her native country. This year saw the release of an anthology of her unnerving short stories, featuring previously unpublished work. Like Frida Kahlo, another artist who worked in Mexico and whose fame skyrocketed posthumously, Carrington’s legacy appears bound for the kind of renown often denied to women who had the mixed blessing of having been linked to high-powered men.

Born into a nouveau riche textiles family, Carrington spent her childhood riding horses and getting kicked out of convent schools. In her teens she enraptured Max Ernst, who was then one of the world’s most famous visual artists. The two moved to Paris, where Carrington, once presented as a debutante to the queen of England, entered Surrealist café society. She met Marcel Duchamp, Louis Aragon and André Breton, and she famously declined to fetch Joan Miró cigarettes. “I wasn’t daunted by any of them,” she recalled of these male luminaries, whose artistic predilection for presenting female sexuality ran aground on a woman keen to be her own muse. It was rumored she later covered Luis Buñuel’s hotel room with menstrual-blood handprints after he forced his keys upon her at a party, in ham-handed ardor.
“Carrington had to live and survive by her imagination because she was being oppressed and silenced. Her internal world was all that she could live through.”

—STACY KLEIN
When Ernst was incarcerated, first by the French and then by the Nazis, Carrington fled to Franco’s Spain, where her stress led to a nervous breakdown and admission into an asylum. (She later documented the experience in her book “Down Below,” a memoir that reads as descent into the netherworld.) Her family eventually attempted to transfer her to an institution in South Africa; instead, she fled to a Mexican diplomat who brought her to his country after a hasty marriage.

It was in Mexico, where Carrington lived until her death, that she was fully able to develop her art. Some of her fellow artists saw themselves diminished in a nation of such magic. As Dalí famously commented after one visit, “I can’t be in a country that is more Surrealist than my paintings.” But Carrington’s Mexico City life imparted space to breathe deeply, to create a world safe from violent political upheaval and her overbearing family. Located between sleep and wakefulness, her creations teem with human animals, supernatural queens and androgynous self-portraiture. She came late to Surrealism, but — like that of her friends Remedios Varo and Kati Horna, as well as Lee Miller, Leonor Fini, Helen Lundeberg, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, Méret Oppenheim and Rosa Rolanda — Carrington’s work enriched the movement with experiences beyond the understanding of her male counterparts. To acknowledge the entirety of Surrealism’s possibilities is to honor these women’s contributions.

Double Edge Theatre’s “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro” was at first focused solely on the Chilean director, writer and magician Alejandro Jodorowsky; it was the company founder Stacy Klein’s repulsion to the news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign that summoned Carrington. “I just recognized the way that Hillary [Clinton] was being treated was completely different than any [male candidate], whether I agreed or disagreed with them,” Klein remembered. “It was the same as the whore-Madonna [dichotomy] that’s been going on for thousands of years. She was an awful bitch, or a vulnerable person who couldn’t walk on her own, who cried.”

Klein thought Clinton surely must triumph, forcing society to reckon with her as a president and with the weight that position implied. Of course, this never came to pass. And Klein made a decision: “to never work on a piece again that didn’t have the leading voice of a woman.”

So Jodorowsky needed a check and balance, a female voice that those familiar with his work will know is often lacking in his real life. For some, the cult filmmaker’s work is overshadowed by his treatment of women — from his Twitter comments asserting that a woman could dress up her lover “as the person who abused you, and it will excite you,” to the murky ethics of engaging an “El Topo” actress in sexual activity
while the cameras rolled. Though he has used the word “rape” to describe this infamous scene, in some later interviews he has said that actress Mara Lorenzio was informed before shooting of his plans.

Double Edge was unaware when it chose its two subjects that Jodorowsky and Carrington knew each other — in fact, their yearlong friendship in Mexico City bohemia resulted in a stage production of “Penelope.” While Carrington’s account of this alignment has not been found, Jodorowsky immortalized his in “The Spiritual Journey of Alejandro Jodorowsky,” in which he recalls being ordered by his guru, Ejo Takata, to accept Carrington as his master, to deal with his mommy issues. “You are still an angry child who rejects women in every domain except that of sex,” Takata says in the book. “You think you can learn only from men.”

After a series of mystical encounters with Carrington-as-Surrealist-princess, the relationship comes to a close. Carrington bids Jodorowsky adieu, but then rushes after him on the street, her clothes in disarray. The provocateur who had recently incited riot with his nudity-laced film “Fando and Lis” sees nothing in her attempt at denouement but a woman at risk of losing her decency. “Cover yourself, Leonora,” he says before they part. “Someone might come by.”

Klein found the genesis of Carrington’s artistic consequence in the challenges she overcame throughout her storied life. “She had to live and survive by her imagination because she was being oppressed and silenced. Her internal world was all that she could live through.”

Like so many other women artists — not to mention the unique yet parallel experiences of queer, trans and differently abled artists, artists of color and those from developing nations — Leonora Carrington’s work seems all the more powerful when considered alongside attempts by even her peers to strip her of agency and recast her in limiting, powerless roles. With shocking persistence, her work refuses these dismissals.
M is the most common sound in the word for “mother” in languages around the world. With “M Stabat Mater,” emerging Israeli choreographer Inbal Oshman creates a stunning tribute to the joys and sorrows of motherhood, along with the tenderness and ferocity that comes with the territory. While pregnant with her third child, Oshman found inspiration in Pergolesi’s version of Stabat Mater, the 13th-century hymn about Mary’s vigil at the foot of the cross. “M Stabat Mater” borrows from the mythological mothers of history: Christianity’s Mary, the dark and violent Hindu goddess Kali and the Four Matriarchs of the Old Testament. Stabat Mater will be performed live on period instruments by New York Baroque Incorporated, one of the ensembles responsible for “the fast-growing vitality of the early music scene in New York,” led by artistic director Wen Yang.
Engage!

This event is free and open to the public.

Sneak Peek

Thursday, April 12 @ 6 p.m.
Alexander Kasser Theater, Studio 104

The theme of motherhood bridges the work of contemporary choreographer Inbal Oshman and 18th-century composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. Join us for an insightful pre-show conversation on the artists' inspiration. Guests to be announced on peakperfs.org.

Inbal Oshman Dance Group

CHOREOGRAPHY Inbal Oshman
DRAMATURGY Yannets Levi
LIGHTING DESIGN Tamar Orr
COSTUME DESIGN Maor Tzabar
PRODUCER Dikla Leibovitz

DANCERS
Ilana Bellahsen, Irit Brunner Kopejka
Adi Peled, Dana Sapir

New York Baroque Incorporated

Wen Yang, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
Sherezade Panthaki, SOPRANO
Christopher Ainslie, COUNTertenOR
Aisllinn Nosky, VIOLIN I
Chloe Fedor, VIOLIN II
Kyle Miller, VIOLA
Ezra Seltzer, CELLO
Wen Yang, VIOLONe
Elliot Graham Figg, KEYBOARD

Dates

Thursday, April 12 @ 7:30 p.m.
Friday, April 13 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, April 14 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, April 15 @ 3 p.m.

60 minutes, no intermission.

Engage!

This event is free and open to the public.

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Friday, April 13 @ 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, April 14 @ 8 p.m.
Sunday, April 15 @ 3 p.m.

60 minutes, no intermission.
I.
Stood The Mother Grieving.
Stood The Mother Grieving As Her Only Son Was Slain.
Stood The Mother Grieving As His Body Was Pulled From The Tallahatchie River.
Stood The Mother Grieving As She Prepared His Body For Funeral Services.

The Mother stood grieving as she dared us to look upon his mutilated face. And in her grief, there was profound rage and tenderness and foresight. The Mother wanted the world to see what it had done to her baby.

How fascinating to know that grief and strength might be two sides of the same coin. That in a moment of terrible sorrow — when your body moves slowly, limbs outstretched grasping for solace, when heartache pierces, when you collapse to the floor in silence, back arched, a wail sitting on your lips — that there might also exist the fervent resolution to persevere.

Did the Mother know, as she stood grieving, that she would awaken a new season? As Demeter retrieved Persephone, bringing with her new fruit, so too did the Mother’s retrieval of her son’s body usher forth a call for justice, galvanizing a people.

In Inbal Oshman’s “M Stabat Mater,” there is a moment when the four dancers take a knee at the front of the stage. Their left forearms rest on their left knees. Their right arms rise into fists behind their heads. They have come to this pause after feverish movement in which they circle in place continuously, their arms over their heads. The pace slows gradually until one dancer rolls up the cloth covering her legs. The others follow suit. They walk to the edge of the stage and kneel.

I want to linger on this moment of clarity, this attempt to reject elements of pathos. I want to know what carries a person to calm from fury and what must be done as one slips between the two states. The dancers soon collapse to the floor. Slowly they begin to cover their arms and legs in a red liquid that signifies blood. How did the Mother traverse this chasm?

Oshman is preoccupied with the vastness of motherhood. She could not know that, despite the breadth of her performance, I remain stuck in a single moment far beyond the choreographer’s immediate artistic concerns — yet intimately connected to the story she tells.

What is it to recognize a thing even if you have not yet taken part in the thing? What I mean is this:

Black motherhood is as joyous as it is precarious in this nation. I know this because I have paid attention to our records. I have watched history show itself again and again. I have watched black mothers shout in rage and march forward as the goddess Kali, prepared to fight the demons of this land, only to return home in defeat.

Surely the Mother saw something that I cannot yet see, something that I cannot yet know. That we must rinse the blood from our bodies and begin anew, even if we still carry the grief.
On my block there is a group of young girls who have mastered the art of double dutch. I see them often, especially when the weather is warm, this tightknit cadre of movers. Their choreography is precise, dynamic. Two command the rope, a sway in their hips as it turns. Two others jump in — knees rising and falling, facing each other.

**Pit pat, pit pat, pit pat, clap! Pit pat, pit pat, pit pat, clap! Pit pat, pit pat, pit pat, turn!**

The jumpers now face outward, their backs not quite touching. The two rope-turners bend slightly at the waist, and an intensity flares in their eyes. Their small wrists flick furiously. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One jumper has lost a barrette from her hair. I watch her dart a glance to the sidewalk to notice where the accessory has landed before she grins widely, as if she pities the barrette because it could not keep her pace.

**Pit, pat, pit pat, pit pat, twirl! Pit, pat, pit pat, pit pat, twirl!**

And so goes this familiar ceremony I encounter on my evening walks home from work. How is it possible to know a thing even if we are oceans, and continents, and generations removed from the thing? What I mean is this: I am marveling at how these young girls sculpt movement from blood memory.

Choreographer Camille A. Brown is meditating on black rituals of movement. What are the stories that live in our bodies? she asks. What is known and unknown? That is, what corporeal data can be mined through dance? Brown’s “ink” reckons with the point at which inherited information meets its contemporary manifestations. She catalogs a repository of African diasporic gestures, even as she re-imagines them so that we won’t forget the many narratives they contain. Consider what Lucille Clifton offers in her poem “i am accused of tending to the past”:

```
i am accused of tending to the past
   as if i made it
   as if i sculpted it
   with my own hands. i did not.
this past was waiting for me
   when i came,
a monstrous unnamed baby
   and i with my mother’s itch
   took it to breast
   and named it
   History.
she is more human now,
   learning languages everyday,
   remembering faces, names and dates.
   when she is strong enough to travel
   on her own, beware, she will.
```

So too does Brown cradle history, so that we might learn to recognize the unseen.

I watch a rehearsal video in which she traverses the dance floor with short, heavy, staccato steps — her knees never rising too high, her arms bent at the elbows, her waist bending toward the floor. These gestures give way to rapid jumping before coming to a cool stop. I know these movements.

On hot summer days, I watch the double dutch queens form these same gestures. The rope-turners bend at the waist; the jumpers step with force and declaration. History has traveled to them. It has found a new dialect.
TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CAMILLE A. BROWN’S “INK” TURN TO PAGE 44.
It’s hard to imagine two artists, two women, more dissimilar than the poet Emily Dickinson and the Spanish performance dynamo Angélica Liddell. Dickinson spent much of her life secluded in a room in her father’s house in Amherst, Mass. Liddell has toured the world to great acclaim with her ferocious work, which she calls “pornography of the soul.” With “Esta Breve Tragedia de la Carne (This Brief Tragedy of the Flesh),” Liddell throws her sometimes naked body into a deep dive for the soul of Emily Dickinson. She uses Dickinson’s repeated use of the word “bees” and her self-imposed confinement, represented by a solitary chair, as the springboards for her imaginative interpretation of the poet’s tumultuous inner life. And Liddell doesn’t just hint at bees; enclosed in a glass box, she joins hundreds of them onstage. Liddell’s work often connects personal and physical pain with politics. If you always wanted to know what made Dickinson tick and you have a taste for fearless, world-class artistry from a brave theater maker, you need to see “Esta Breve Tragedia de la Carne.”
Tragedia Carne
G E D Y O F T H E F L E S H

“Angélica Liddell’s brand of theatre is not for the faint of heart. It may be the most visceral expression to be found on any stage today.”

—FINANCIAL TIMES

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Sensory Subjects:
Angélica Liddell’s
“Esta Breve Tragedia de la Carne”

BY SOPHIA WANG

1. Senses

“Performances of the senses reveal histories — they propose practices, privilege materials, mirror social conditions and implement techniques. And in each of these steps, a body is constructed — even if momentarily — even if just for the duration of one particular performance.”
—LEPECKI, A. AND BANES, S. “THE SENSES IN PERFORMANCE”

In the darkness, the work’s first offerings are sonic: the horn fanfare of arrival (or the start of a hunt) and a silence broken by death metal music. Sensory deprivation and overload are tools of torture and the theater, visceral intensities made to exploit embodied experience. Angélica Liddell’s “Esta Breve Tragedia de la Carne” opens with a pageant of viscerality: an assault on the audience’s ears, a stripped body on stage, blood and penetration. One might feel disgust, fear, aversion, but also desire, gratification, wonder. Our embodied viewing allows for both empathy and exclusion, to our excitement, dismay and relief. Devotional music — Bach, indigenous American tribal song — locates the work across continents, cultural affiliations and fantasies sustained by the gaps therein. As an audience, we inhabit one and many distinct bodies, as do the performers we watch.

2. Seen/Unseen

The choices and structures that determine what is concealed versus what is on display are worth scrutiny. When we see someone or something that is rarely shown on stage, it’s worth reflecting: for whose and what benefit?

What would be worth keeping invisible and unnamed?
3. Cruelty

“The theater will never find itself again — i.e., constitute a means of true illusion — except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.” —ARTAUD, A. “THE THEATRE AND ITS DOUBLE”

A world is being defined here that observes a legible logic and rationale for its unfolding. There are continuities on every level. What is the mise that this world materializes? There are a series of tableaus and ritual formations, both satisfying and anxiety-provoking in their unrelenting contingency. There are bodies that suggest pain, violence, deformity and the socially marginal: performers with missing limbs and genetic disorders; a face masked as John Merrick, of the drama “The Elephant Man”; Liddell’s body, bloodied and spread-eagled. Amid the brutality there is also gentleness and grace: careful ministrations of bodies, tender words of address. If we witness something cruel or discomfiting, does our aversion relieve us of our complicity?

4. Symbols

“I propose symbols — almost in a medieval sense — that give meaning to the inexpressible. That’s what worries me: the inexpressible. I consider my works to be long journeys to unexplored lands, where each stop gives sense to the one previous. That is to say, the scenes only make sense in their development, sometimes only at the conclusion of the work. My pieces are organisms flooded with blood vessels that feed the unconscious. The most important thing is to build these connections, or to establish very solid codes to elaborate an enigma. Not to solve it, but to ask it. But what gives coherence is, finally, the aesthetic structure.” —LIDDELL, A., “POETRY THAT SMASHES OUR COMFORT. ANGÉLICA LIDDELL’S ‘DEAD DOG AT DRY CLEANERS: THE STRONG’”

The work is densely referential in its citation of film and literature, theatrical archetypes and ceremonial songs and formations. As citations accumulate, this symbolic system — made visual, through images and text, and aural, through speech and song — becomes its own frame of reference: musical passages echo one another; paths are retraced; a glass case arrives, leaves and arrives again. So the alternations between representation (performance) and ritual (manifestation) move us continually across both registers, and we move in and out of our suspension. Symbols produce pleasure in both their operation and their recognition as such: the pleasure in noticing a rhyme in a poem or a pattern in the natural world.

5. Risk

It’s thrilling to be shown something that induces fear. The performers subject themselves to physical threats and exposure, and our acts of witness enable empathy, but also contagion. The danger that’s approximated is still proximate; it’s still close enough.

6. Interiority

A collectivity or a collection has a quality that feels singular, like the inside of one person’s experience. In the different forms that boundedness takes over the course of this work, we are reminded of edges, completion, containers and containment, but also leakage, seepage, deformations and death. We understand what is kept on the outside and what is kept on the inside; even what is inside holds further interiorities, because interiority is an infinite regress. One wall comes down, and another is intact just behind it. Certain modesties are abandoned; others remain in place.

When peace arrives and we’re returned to safety, the truce we’re offered feels like an uneasy armistice. We move forward with heightened senses.
Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Julia Wolfe (Anthracite Fields, 2015) and “cello goddess” (The New Yorker) Maya Beiser honor the essential labor of spinning thread. “Spinning” celebrates the work once performed by hand by women. Music has long been a vital part of the craft – both as a propelling force and a vital distraction. To pay homage to the human dignity of this “women’s work,” Wolfe and Beiser create a sonic universe for three cellos and voice featuring multimedia projections imagined by the innovative artist Laurie Olinder. In Beiser’s words: “I found in Julia’s music a rare quality – combining folk, rock and classical elements in a distinct and relentless energy. This collaboration is one that has been in our minds for many years, and we are thrilled to now embark on this journey together.”
Dates
Thursday, May 10 @ 7:30 p.m.
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Engage!
This event is free and open to the public.

Community Conversation
Saturday, May 12, post-performance
Alexander Kasser Theater
Join the creative team of “Spinning” to share reflections and responses immediately following the show.

“Spinning” was commissioned by Peak Performances @ Montclair State University, and made possible by The MAP Fund, which is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Forces “at work” could also describe the labor dynamics present in “Spinning,” a collaboration between composer Julia Wolfe and cellist Maya Beiser. Like the Fures’ cable, the cello’s strings radiate with tension and energy when tightened by tuning pegs. Unlike the Fures’ cable, there are bodies wrapped around these strings, showing us their work – hands manipulating the strings, a body shifting its weight, sweat on the face. Wolfe and Beiser understand this work as a form of manual labor, bound to the skills, health and treatment of the body as the agent of music.
Wolfe and Beiser imagine a rhizomatic piece rooted in images of spiders spinning webs (the strongest thread known in nature) and woven with the sounds of spindle and distaff, the knocking of a spinning wheel, gears grinding in an industrial machine, and references to contemporary popular music.

It brings to mind Dziga Vertov’s “Man With a Movie Camera” (1929), which associates the process of filming, editing and projecting with the work of factory laborers, women having their hair done, men receiving a shave and the bureaucratic procedure of getting married or divorced — ordinary tasks that nonetheless change the social conditions of the body. In the film, we see Vertov’s wife, the master filmmaker and film editor Yelizaveta Svilova, splicing and taping these small excerpts of daily life into a frenzied composition that ultimately transforms into a hypnotic expression of imaginative labor. Contrasting the contrived drama of narrative music and the austerity of minimalist music, Wolfe and Beiser similarly aim to show us the physicality of their work, and by imposing rhythm and language onto that work, transcend it.

Beiser and Wolfe were still composing when I spoke with them; they discussed the creation of “Spinning” as a back-and-forth collaboration between Wolfe’s post-minimalist compositional style and Beiser’s performative virtuosity, which often combines the cello with recorded tracks and singing. Wolfe seeks out what she calls extramusical but non-narrative themes to create her compositions, at times using the open tuning present in folk music to put “grit” (Beiser’s word) back into the repetitive incantations of minimalist music. Meanwhile, Beiser’s fingers manipulating the strings of a cello trace back to traditional methods of spinning thread. The two imagine a rhizomatic piece rooted in images of spiders spinning webs (the strongest thread known in nature) and woven with the sounds of spindle and distaff, the knocking of a spinning wheel, gears grinding in an industrial machine, and references to contemporary popular music. The artist Laurie Olinder will project found, drawn and re-animated representations of spinning, broadly interpreted, onto layers of scrim wrapped around the cellists onstage, creating a durational visual environment that entwines with the music.

Wolfe speaks of her scores as incorporating some element of open notation, revealing the live communication happening between performers, composer, audience and Olinder as visual artist. We often speak of the derogatory effects of “spin” when detected in propaganda, public relations or gossip: it is interpretative, a biased attempt to persuade. But spinning is how we relate to the ambiguities of our cultural mores and creatively reframe the social conditions of our lived experience. Especially concerning domestic work or blue-collar labor — labor that directly implicates the body — the communicative act of spinning often undermines an authoritative norm. Examples of “spin” are a whisper campaign, a coded gesture and the rhythms of a folk song that, interpreted within specific contexts, can both make work more tolerable and demonstrate a united front within and against the boss’s domain. Similarly, the aural and visual landscape created by Wolfe, Beiser and Olinder is a collaborative space, with each participant exchanging different viewpoints on the work at hand. What they suggest is performance as labor, and labor as work of the imagination.
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- Subject to availability, tickets may be exchanged up to 24 hours before the performance for which they were purchased. Tickets may only be exchanged for a different performance of the same event. There is a $5 exchange fee for each ticket.
Claudia La Rocco (editor in chief) is the author of The Best Most Useless Dress (Badlands Unlimited); selected poetry, performance texts, images and criticism; and the novel petit cadeau, published by the Chocolate Factory Theater as a print edition of one and a four-day, interdisciplinary live edition. She edited I Don’t Poem: An Anthology of Painters (Off the Park Press) and Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets, the catalog for Danspace Project’s PLATFORM 2015, which she curated. July, the debut album from animals & giraffes – her duo with musician-composer Phillip Greenlief – has just been released by Edgetone Records. She is an Artforum contributor, was a critic and reporter for The New York Times for many years and is now editor in chief of the arts and culture platform Open Space for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

David DeWitt (managing editor) spent almost 20 years as an editor at The New York Times, including many years working on its Arts desk handling articles in dance, theater, music and other forms. He also wrote film, theater and television reviews for the paper. David has master’s degrees in English and acting and is a member of SAG-AFTRA and Equity.

Dena Beard is executive director of the Lab in San Francisco. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and was assistant curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Her work at the Lab centers on using the exhibition and performance space as a platform to investigate systems of perception in abstract and everyday experience. She has organized exhibitions and projects with Dora García, Ellen Fullman, Fritzie Irizar, Jacqueline Gordon, Brontez Purnell, Constance Hockaday, D-L Alvarez, Wadada Leo Smith, Lutz Bacher, Norma Jeane, Anna Halprin, Barry McGee, Silke Otto-Knapp and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, among others.

Caitlin Donohue is a cultural journalist from San Francisco who for three years has been based in Mexico City, where she works with the queer event curation collective Traición. She was culture editor of the San Francisco Bay Guardian, co-founder of 4U Magazine and a staff writer at Tavi Gevinson’s Rookie. Her work has appeared in iD, High Times, The Advocate, Remezcla, Pitchfork Review, Marie Claire, Vice and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s Open Space. Before Caitlin was assigned the essay on Leonora Carrington for Peak Performances, that dead artist appeared in her life several times. She lives blocks away from Carrington’s house in Mexico.

Teresa Fiore is the Theresa and Lawrence R. Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian-American Studies at Montclair State University. She is the author of Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy’s Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies (Fordham University Press, 2017) and the editor of the 2006 issue of Quaderni del ‘900 on John Fante. Her numerous articles on Italian-American culture, migration to-from Italy, Sicilian culture and 20th-century Italian literature and cinema have appeared in Italian, English and Spanish in journals and edited collections. She coordinates a regular program of cultural events and educational initiatives on campus, through which she has also presented performances, workshops and talks linked to Italian theater: montclair.edu/inserra

Jennifer Krasinski is an art columnist for The Village Voice and the recipient of a 2013 Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. She is also a contributing editor to Yale University’s Theater magazine.
Contributors

Jessica Lynne is co-founder and editor of ARTS.BLACK, a journal of art criticism from black perspectives. She received her B.A. in Africana Studies from New York University and has been awarded residencies and fellowships from Art21 and the Cue Foundation, Callaloo, and the Center for Book Arts. Her writing has appeared in publications such as Aperture, Art in America, The Brooklyn Rail and *Kinfolk*. Currently, Jessica serves as the manager of development and communication at Recess.

Jana Perković is a contemporary performance critic, with work regularly appearing in The Guardian, Blouin Artinfo, Tanzconnexions, RealTime, The Lifted Brow and others. She has worked as a dramaturg in both dance and text-based theatre and also works at the Melbourne School of Design and Victorian College of the Arts (at University of Melbourne) as a researcher and lecturer. She produces Audio Stage, a podcast “on theater and stuff.”

Larissa Velez-Jackson (LVJ) is a New York City-based choreographer and multiplatform artist. She uses improvisation as a main tool for research and creation, blending dance, sound and deep humor. She has presented work at numerous NYC venues and programs, such as the American Realness Festival ’11 and ’15 at Abrons Arts Center, the Chocolate Factory Theater in ’14; and at New York Live Arts this year with Yackez, a collaboration with her husband, Jon Velez-Jackson. LVJ was nominated for a 2016 New York Dance and Performance Award, the Bessie, for outstanding emerging choreographer, and she was presented a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grant to Artists award for 2016.

Maloy Luakian works as a freelance writer focusing mostly on arts, culture and food in and around Southeast Asia and China. Her assignments have taken her from rainforests and abandoned villages to the kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants and the studios of underground artists. When not writing or traveling, Maloy spends her time creating metalwork, having apprenticed as a goldsmith, engraver and stone-setter in Florence, Italy. She is based in Hong Kong.

Sophia Wang creates and performs movement-based works in collaboration with performance artists, writers, and visual and sound artists. She is a founding member of the Brontez Purnell Dance Company and has danced for artists Xavier Le Roy, Tino Sehgal, Jérôme Bel, Xandra Ibarra and Amara Tabor-Smith. She earned a doctorate in English from the University of California at Berkeley and integrates her research and performance practices through writing and curatorial projects focused on critical somatics: thinking with and as bodies. Current engagements include performances at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Detroit Institute of Arts; she will take up her Taipei Artist Village residency in 2018.

Kelsey Wroten is a freelance illustrator and comics artist. She is a Kansas City native currently living in Brooklyn and working on a graphic novel for Uncivilized Books slated to come out in 2018. Her client list includes The New York Times, The Village Voice, Refinery 29, NPR, Lenny, Vice and more.

American Premiere
Karin Coonrod | Compagnia de’ Colombari (USA)
The Merchant of Venice
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American Premiere
Ashley Fure
Adam Fure | International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE)
The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects
October 6–8

Premiere
Pam Tanowitz | Simone Dinnerstein
New Work for Goldberg Variations
October 19–22

U.S. Premiere
Emma Dante
Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale (Italy)
Le Sorelle Macaluso (The Sisters Macaluso)
November 16–19

Shanghai Quartet
with Yiwen Lu, erhu (China)
December 16

Premiere
Camille A. Brown & Dancers
ink
February 1–4

World Premiere
Stacy Klein | Double Edge Theatre
Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro
March 17–25

American Premiere
Inbal Oshman (Israel)
New York Baroque Incorporated
M Stabat Mater
April 12–15

American Premiere
Ángelica Liddell
Atra Bilis Teatro (Spain)
Esta Breve Tragedia de la Carne (This Brief Tragedy of the Flesh)
April 19–22

World Premiere
Maya Beiser | Julia Wolfe
Laurie Olinder
Spinning
May 10–13