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“Queer, Jewish”: A Discussion

on AUGUST 5, 2019

We limit the rich potentiality of our identities when we adhere to constructs or conceive of the self as static. Whether we render the components of our identity as parallel structures that cannot intersect, or we allow the impediments and preconceptions placed upon us by the outside world to influence or shape the narratives we create for ourselves, we diminish the complexity and unique matrices of our selves when we resolve to be static.

A provocative way to challenge and depart from static identities or a static sense of self is, quite literally, movement. Dance and physical performance are powerful tools of

%%footer%% creative communication that convey things which are too abstract, ineffable, or too poignantly inchoate to convey otherwise. In the forthcoming, exploratory dance production *Queer, Jewish*, opening August 8th at Carnegie Stage (on behalf of off the WALL productions), performer, dancer, and educator Moriah Ella Mason examines and celebrates the myriad facets of queer and Jewish identities. Specifically, *Queer, Jewish* examines these identities and their profound and plentiful intersection and commonalities through the lens and within the context of diaspora.

(L to R) Ru Emmons, Sarah Friedlander, Amelia Reuss, Harry J. Hawkins, Moriah Ella Mason; (Center) Olivia Tucker

Rather than shirking diaspora and the more modern concept of Diasporism, Mason and creative collaborators Ru Emmons (dancer), Sarah Friedlander (dancer), Harry J. Hawkins (dancer), Amelia Reuss (dancer) and Olivia Tucker (actor, dramaturg) embrace and reconceptualize the intertwining, symbiotic relationship between queerness, Jewishness, and diasporic existence. By reconceiving myth, queer and feminist narratives in Jewish sacred texts, and the real and imagined paradigm in which queer bodies exist, *Queer, Jewish* seeks to create a “future aesthetic” that upholds a dynamic, non-static sense of identity.

Director/Creator, Choreographer, and performer Moriah Ella Mason took time to answer some questions on *Queer, Jewish*, and detail the fascinating processes behind the project’s creation.

What are the origins of *Queer, Jewish* as a performance piece? When did development of this project begin? How did the performers/artists involved come to work on this project?

I've been creating work about various ways that I experience Jewish identity for the past 4 years. In 2015, I was thinking a lot about the intersections of Jewishness, whiteness, and Americaness and how those manifest for me, as a white-skinned Ashkenazi Jew, and for many of my friends who share that identity. At that time, I was interested in the elements of cultural specificity that many Ashkenazi Jews lost in the past few generations as we assimilated into white culture in the U.S. I was also theorizing that the hollow feeling from those lost practices may be a motivating force behind some of the shadier forms of cultural appropriation that most of us have been guilty of at one point or another. So, I began interviewing and recording conversations with my peers, trying to untangle these threads. And I also began exploring these ideas in movement with another Jewish dancer, doing things like juxtaposing the types of sways and bows from Jewish prayer with yoga asanas, and traditional Eastern European folk dance with the booty-shaking and grinding that we actually get down with when we go dancing today. Those explorations appeared as a short duet called "Diasporate" that we shared at the Kelly Strayhorn's *newMoves Festival* in the spring of 2015.

That summer I was exploring these ideas further through a residency at Pearlarts Studios. Staycee Pearl looked at what I was creating and she challenged me to put more of my own experience in the work, to be vulnerable instead of relying on clever, abstracted ideas. I began by recording an interview with myself, asking and answering the same questions I had been posing to my peers. That led to the most personal dance work I had created up to that point – a solo called "Funny, She Doesn't Look Jewish." It also led to my rediscovery of Barbra Streisand. I loved Barbra when I was in middle school. The persona she's crafted throughout her career weaves together brashness, tenderness, vulnerability, toughness, and a deep need to be loved as she is. I can't recall any of her movies without touching that 13 year-old part of myself.

The creation of that solo also led me to realize that my queer identity and my Jewish identity are deeply intertwined. I had a difficult time accepting my attraction to women and non-binary people because I faced so much anti-Semitism growing up in my small town. I didn't feel strong enough to wear two despised labels simultaneously.

I knew that there was more I wanted to dig into about the intersections of these identities and that I wanted to engage in that process with a group. And that's how *Queer, Jewish* was born. Hans and Ginny had seen my solo and when I pitched them the idea of this expansion they were incredibly enthusiastic and supportive.

(L to R) Ru Emmons, Moriah Ella Mason, Amelia Reuss, Sarah Friedlander; (Center) Harry J. Hawkins

All of the artists involved in the project have a stake in this topic – everyone's either queer or Jewish or both. Those shared experiences and intentions have crafted a rehearsal space that allowed me the emotional safety to continue to bring personal content and vulnerability to the work; and though I don't like to speak on behalf of my cast, I think it has served that purpose for at least some of them as well.

Can you speak a bit about what the identities "queer" and "Jewish" mean to you? How have they developed and manifested in your life? How do they interact with your art?

Both queerness and Jewishness have marked me as an outsider in many spaces. But, for me, both of these identity markers are context dependent and liminal. As a bisexual woman, how I am read and treated depends a lot on the gender of my current partner. As a white-skinned, non-Orthodox Jew living in a city, most people don't know my ethnic/religious status unless I tell them. This positioning has taught me a lot about the power of contextualizing and recontextualizing images and also about the performativity of identity. These are key parts of my art-making practice.

Diaspora is probably familiar to people in a national framework, but perhaps not something people have engaged with on a personal/bodily level. How do you define diaspora in terms of identity and heritage? How does diaspora inform and impact the body and physiological self?

I experience being part of a diaspora as a requirement that I intentionally craft my home and build a relationship with the land I am on and the other people who are inhabiting that land. Last summer during a workshop on Diasporism, another American Jew

shared that they have a sensation that they are always hovering a few feet over the earth. I think of Diasporism as an invitation to root without a demand of permanence or exclusive dominion and while retaining a memory and imprint of all the other places you've rooted before. And having a sense of relationship with the ecology around you and a sense of safety with the people around you are both necessary to fully thrive physically and emotionally.

Sarah Friedlander and Moriah Ella Mason

What are the intersections of queerness, Jewishness, and diaspora that you have found most striking?

So much of the Jewish story is a story of moving from country to country pursuing safety or opportunity. And that is also the experience of many queer folks who leave their home communities for cities where they might experience more safety on the street and less housing and job discrimination. I've also been struck by how so many stereotypes about Jews and queer folks mirror one another. We are too loud, too pushy, our men are too feminine, our women are too masculine. . . we are just in general too much! And, of course, these stereotypes get applied to a lot of other marginalized groups as well.

Has anything surprised you in the process of developing Queer, Jewish? Have you reconsidered or re-examined aspects of your sense of self, sense of identity/ identities, or sense of community during this process? If so, how? How has your

approach to your art changed (if at all)?

I'm not sure it's a surprise really, but I've been finding the agency to question and experiment more with my gender expression. I don't know where I'll land with my understanding of my own gender, but it's been really enlivening to make more room for my masculinity and to not feel so restricted to the binary.

Do you see dance, or any other form of art as a form of redress for something like diaspora, or do art and diaspora coexist?

It's difficult for me to answer this question because I don't see diaspora as a thing that needs to be redressed. Though the Jewish diaspora began as exile, and though we have experienced violence and oppression in a lot of different countries, our story is not only one of trauma and exclusion. Our story is not even just one story. The experiences of Jews in China and India and Ethiopia and Syria are really different than the experiences of Jews in Europe. And the richness that is brought to Jewishness by the different strands of the diaspora is gorgeous. Diaspora may be caused by specific acts of violence that could be redressed by forms of reparation – as slavery reparations would redress the major cause of the African diaspora – but I don't think the existing diaspora is a negative thing. We could even think of diaspora

itself as a form of intercultural art. Certainly various diasporas have produced some of our greatest art forms.

How has dance and physical performance allowed for connection within your communities and with other communities?

In the process of making *Queer, Jewish* we held a few community workshops – both sharing the things we had been making in rehearsal and also inviting community members to created movement with us. Ideas that community members brought to those spaces stayed within the

work. I think physical performance allows us to access memories and ideas that aren’t always able to be verbalized, or that need to be fully felt by the body before they can be made into words by the mind. I’m really grateful that people were willing to step into this with us. It made our process so much richer.

(L to R) Ru Emmons, Harry J. Hawkins, Amelia Reuss

Queer, Jewish opens August 8th at the Carnegie Stage, and runs through August 18th. For showtimes and ticket information, visit Carnegie Stage’s **site.**

Photography Credit: Heather Mull