

RELATIONS

with Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Bebe Miller

A Performance Reunion

with writings by Tara Aisha Willis, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Bebe Miller

Relations was a series of performances that took place November 2–3, 2018, as part of the MCA Stage season at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Curated and organized by MCA's Associate Curator of Performance Tara Aisha Willis, the event brought together Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Ralph Lemon for the first time as a trio in two improvised performances in the Edlis Neeson Theater.

The following text originally appeared in a booklet published on the occasion of *Relations*, which also included writing by Claudia La Rocco, titled "BebeIshRalph." Sections of the text have been edited and excerpted for this article.

The full booklet is available online as a PDF at <https://mcachicago.org/Calendar/2018/11/Ishmael-Houston-Jones-Ralph-Lemon-Bebe-Miller-Relations>.

—CQ eds

Part family reunion and part-first time encounter, they [Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Bebe Miller] pay homage to their past selves, gesture to the futures of dance that they have inspired, and testify to their present-tense artistry. These longtime peers, friends, and icons have not shared a stage since the early 1980s, when Houston-Jones organized a series of solo and duet performances highlighting the then under-discussed intersection of black choreographers making "non-mainstream dance." After nearly 40 years of influencing each other from afar throughout their prolific careers, the kinship between Houston-Jones, Lemon, and Miller unfolds in real time on the MCA Stage in two bare-bones improvisations that bring together each artist's living, embodied archives and their individual relationships to performing and making dance.

[from the press materials]

Introduction

Tara Aisha Willis

*R*elations grew from a brief conversation with Ishmael Houston-Jones (b. 1951), both of us exhausted and downing coffee while I described what I felt was my then new curatorial responsibility: crafting how the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's Stage season influences the performance "canon," while staying true to my belief in finding unexpected ways to declare our relationship to what precedes us. I asked Ishmael how he felt about being asked frequently to perform his early works or speak about experimental and improvised dance in downtown New York in the late 1970s through the 1990s. Was it because he is one of the few black dance artists from that scene and we are in a moment when history and the present are, rightfully, being examined for unconsidered perspectives?

I told him that I see him as a forebearer of my practices as a dancer and curator, among artists including Blondell Cummings (1944–2015), Fred Holland (1951–2016), Bill T. Jones (b. 1952), Ralph Lemon (b. 1952), Bebe Miller (b. 1950), and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (b. 1950). Ishmael's response, like his improvisational performance style, was indirect yet practical: "You know, I've never actually performed with Ralph and Bebe. I'd love to do that." For Bebe, Ishmael, and Ralph, though the historical and cultural contexts around their work over the last forty years require attention, even intervention, more crucial is the present. So, what if the answers to my questions aren't in a history lesson but a performance? What if the only way to understand the past is by looking at the artists' bodies at work today? Improvisation is a strategy for performing and making dances at which these three are experts, and improvisation has been integral to their work from the beginning. Improvisation can be trusted to bring out who they are and what they do—their tics and habits, their past work balanced on each flick of an arm with the immediacy of responding to the moment. Though they have never danced as a trio before, since that first conversation with Ishmael we have all imagined *Relations* as a reunion.



photo © Dan Merlo

[Front] Bebe Miller, [back, left to right] Ralph Lemon, and Ishmael Houston-Jones at the performance of *Relations*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, November 2 & 3, 2018.

With shared history always just under the surface, their inventing a dance together in front of an audience is completely new yet completely familiar territory...

We could mythologize them: Ishmael the punk, for whom labels like “black,” “queer,” or “experimental dance” aren’t limits so much as malleable tools; Bebe the linguist, overlaying multiple articulations of her relationship to dance, culture, and society, and trusting what that intricacy unearths; Ralph the double agent, posing big, poetic questions while adroitly dodging answers in favor of something less nameable. But the possibilities within these improvised performances on the MCA’s stage hinge on the intimacy, often at a distance, of their relationships with each other, not on those imagined figures.

Among only a few choreographers of their generation and ilk who continue to make work, their relationship seems as much about mutual artistic influence as it is about friendship. I have looked to each of them as guideposts for what dance can be, what choices black artists can make. We are not starting from scratch in the current dance landscape when we ask big questions by experimenting with dance, in part because these three have already been in conversation for a long time, along with many others. As Ishmael, Ralph, and Bebe navigate their craft together, *Relations* continues that conversation.

EXCERPTS FROM CURATOR’S STATEMENT FOR PLATFORM 2012: *PARALLELS*, DANSPACE PROJECT, NEW YORK¹

Ishmael Houston-Jones

“I chose the name *Parallels* for the series because while all the choreographers participating are Black and in some ways relate to the rich tradition of Afro-American dance, each has chosen a form outside of that tradition and even outside the tradition of mainstream modern dance.... This new generation of Black artists—who exist in the parallel worlds of Black America and of new dance—is producing work that is richly diverse.” [from the program notes for the original 1982 *Parallels* events]

So it was in 1982 when I was newly arrived in New York from Philadelphia where I’d performed with Group Motion Media Theater (a company led by two former members of the Mary Wigman ensemble in Berlin) and studied improvisation with Terry Fox, African at the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble, modern (Horton) with

¹Reproduced and excerpted from the catalogue for the Danspace Project series PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones in February–March 2012, edited by Judy Hussie-Taylor and Lydia Bell.

“I can’t take my eyes off his dancing. He scares me a little. I don’t understand why he dances the way he dances, like he’s mad at somebody, with an odd kind of grace.” [R.L.]

Joan Kerr as well as contact improvisation and one semester of ballet. I asked Cynthia Hedstrom, the director of Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery, if I could curate a series composed of a group of “Black” choreographers who were working outside the mainstream of modern dance. All those definitions seemed so simple to me then. To me “Blacks” were the descendants of West Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. They may or may not have voluntarily intermarried with Native Americans or less voluntarily interbred with the majority population. They were all “freed” by the end of the 19th century but suffered discrimination in the form of Jim Crow laws and the inability to vote or to use the same public facilities or acquire equal education as the majority population. They could not marry whomever they wanted, and they suffered real violence and death in the struggle to correct these inequities. They also invented Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, Jazz, and Rap. That’s who “Black” folk were to me then. I did not consider folks from other parts of the Diaspora: not the Caribbean and no, not Africa.

What was “beyond the mainstream” was somewhat trickier to define. The Judson Dance Theater (1962–64) is usually cited as the watershed moment in dance history when traditional concert modern dance gave way to a period of more experimental post-modern dance, with Merce Cunningham seen as the intermediary figure. However, most often in the history of the Judson era the contributions of Black experimentalists are either invisible or relegated to a footnote of the more “serious” post-modern choreographers....

In Merrill Brockway’s 1980 Dance in America PBS special *Beyond the Mainstream*, the only non-white person who appears in the hour is Kei Takei. Were there no African Americans working beyond Brockway’s mainstream? Ditto for Michael Blackwood’s 1981 documentary, *Making Dances*, featuring the work of Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, et al. (Blondell Cummings is seen performing in a clip of Monk’s *Education of the Girlchild* [italics added for emphasis].) This same cast of choreographers, with a few variations, shows up in Sally Banes’s 1982 book *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Apparently,



photo © Pamela Moore

Ishmael Houston-Jones performs his work, *Relatives*, an improvised duet with his mother, Pauline H. Jones, during the 1982 *Parallels* series at Danspace Project, New York.



photo © Chelsea Lemon Felzer

Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller on set for Isaac Julien's 1999 film, *Three*.

in a dance movement that began in the impassioned defiant days of the 1960s and proclaimed from the stage and in manifestos that dance was a democratic form for everyone, “everyone” was a rather limited concept....

It's been thirty years since Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, the late Harry Sheppard, Gus Solomons Jr., and I performed on the first *Parallels* series at Danspace Project [in 1982]. It's been twenty-five since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar joined us on the *Parallels in Black* tour to Paris, Geneva, and London. Now Bebe, Gus, Jawole, along with David Rousseve, Cynthia Oliver, myself, and others, are on the faculties of major university dance departments. In the first *Parallels* series, I was making the case that to be a contemporary Black dance maker, one did not have to be a direct descendant of Ailey. We were coming from Cunningham, Nina Weiner, Monk, Contact Improvisation, as well as African and American Black Dance traditions. Now many of those traditions are part of the modern dance canon; dance students have been exposed to those forms and to us as teachers....

As the African American choreographers of my generation have continued using their progressive ideas to make new works and to disrupt the canon, whom can we identify as the next generation who will wreak havoc on the status quo?

ISHMAEL

Ralph Lemon

Shaman. A person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits. Typically such people enter a trance state during a ritual, and practice divination and healing.

He shows us his ass, he shows us his dick, his fat, his skinny, he shows his fear, his rage, he shows us his wisdom...

He's never read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; at least he hadn't by 2011.

1982. St. Mark's Church, Danspace Project. I meet Ishmael Houston-Jones. What a name, Ishmael, like from *Moby Dick*, Melville, I think to myself. He calls my dance, *Wanda in the Awkward Age*, from 1981, “a black dance,” and I tell him that that is absurd. He says that it is OK that I disagree and asks me to be part of an event he is curating at St. Mark's Danspace, called *Parallels*. A grouping of an (imagined) black downtown dance community, seven of us. He was feeling lonely, he said. Sure, why not, I said.

1987. On tour. Paris. Dancing at the American Center. Ishmael, Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Bebe Miller,



photo © Johan Elbers

Bebe Miller and Ralph Lemon perform their Bessie Award-winning duet, *Two*, at Dance Theater Workshop's Bessie Schönberg Dance Theatre, New York, in 1986. This work was adapted for Isaac Julien's 1999 film, *Three*.

and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar are all here. I'm captivated watching the whole show from offstage, everybody's very different dancing points of view. Offstage (every night) Ishmael seems to be yawning, or not watching at all. I can't take my eyes off his dancing. He scares me a little. I don't understand why he dances the way he dances, like he's mad at somebody, with an odd kind of grace.

1987. Rimini (the place where Fellini was born). Fred Holland, Ishmael, and I are performing. (I have brought along my twelve-year-old daughter, Chelsea, who has completely fallen in love with Fred, of course.) Ishmael danced tonight in only his underwear and worn-out black combat boots, bodysurfing over the empty chairs of the small audience in this tidy outdoor plaza, in this quaint Italian port town. I think he frightened the few who were there. I thought he was crazy.

1989. I watch Ishmael dance with his mother on TV, PBS, *Alive from Off Center*, and for a moment I want to be Ishmael, I want to dance with my mom. "Dance your little heart out Chucky," his moms says! Fuck him, I say to myself, with abandoned envy.

1995. Performance Space 122. Tonight I watched Ishmael catch flying spit, Keith Hennessy's spit, gobs of it, right in the center of his mouth, again and again. Like he was in love, making love. I haven't seen anything as artfully violent on stage since then.

2010. Just saw the reconstruction of *THEM* at PS122. I missed the original version in 1985, probably because I was at a Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane show, or maybe Molissa Fenley, or maybe a Charlie Moulton extravaganza, the superstars at the time. Damn, it was disturbing, vital, poignant, raw, and still timely. In 1985 I was going to ballet class every day. Enough said.

2011. At Judson Memorial Church, Yvonne Meier (Ishmael's ex of many years back) asked Ishmael to strip naked and roll around in a pile of dirt and he did. And then he put on a skirt made of bags of walnuts and she told him to jump up and down. And he did, for a long time. Which freaked the dancer-choreographer David Thomson out, me too. I think David was even crying.

2012. A letter to a young artist.

...My humble advice, because I am older and you are younger, don't be so self-conscious, vain. What's up with this generation and its narcissism? It's what's inside, but you already know this. It's also about getting so deep in the work that your body disappears. It's about the work, brother, not the fucking beauty. Making work where you are too confident in how good, smart, contemporary, transgressive the work looks—seems—is a mistake.

When you start to become too self-conscious, just think of Ishmael, he was inside a fucking garbage bag (unseen) for an hour and it was the best moment of the ten-hour marathon at St. Mark's Danspace (the Parallels redux) in 2012, let's not forget.



photo © Ian Douglas

Ishmael Houston-Jones [in a black garbage bag] performs in *The End*, PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, Danspace Project, New York. Evening curated by Ralph Lemon.

I asked Ishmael what he was going to do a few weeks before the marathon—silence. And then some days before he said he had no idea. The day before, that evening, a kind of dress rehearsal, he was preparing in the church, punching small holes in a black plastic garbage bag. And then maybe a half hour later he asked me to help tape him into a separate top and bottom, prepared bags covering his whole body. Before I completely taped him in he asked me to insert, hand him some necessary paraphernalia: a notebook, a paperback novel (*Invisible Man*), a flashlight, a cordless microphone. And then he asked me to help roll him into the sanctuary space. I did. He rehearsed, not letting anyone know what he was doing inside the circum-rotating plastic bag with its odd start-and-stop rhythm. After about fifteen minutes his now-amplified voice asked me to let him know when an hour had passed.

He did it again the next day, in front of an audience. This time it was not a rehearsal; still he made the audience completely disappear. And it was perfect. Occasionally reading aloud from *Invisible Man* (the audience having no idea what the source of the reading was), also singing-screaming a wild gospel that went on and on, referencing something from a Miguel Gutierrez rehearsal he was currently involved in. His imagined, necessary, private, sacred stuff kept him company in his suffocating and liberating cocoon.

After forty minutes it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. He stayed in a garbage bag for an hour. That's all that really happened, what one witnessed. A beauty stripped down to some kind of black, dull, reflective plastic, deathly loud boisterous nothing, rolling aimlessly around on the floor...provoking and entertaining the whole room. A true act?

And when it was over he was helped out of the bag by a young female stagehand. He was prone, soaking wet, he didn't move, wasn't smiling, his eyes were far away... Maybe he has died, I thought.

Ishmael almost died. 2013. The heart thing. I remember sitting in the waiting room at Beth Israel Hospital thinking about how remarkable it is that we are still at this work, our shrinking generation.

But Ishmael didn't die. Was seemingly dancing again in no time. He soared in Miguel's *Age & Beauty part 3* (2015), literally. Harnessed, floating above New York Live Art's

stage space, wearing a unitard. A white unitard. Yeah, slim, beautiful, and dancing better than ever.

I thought to myself, maybe I need to have a heart thing. His most recent 2016 epic, *Lost and Found*, a cocurated platform (his third curatorial platform over thirty-four years at St. Mark's Danspace), was a brilliant, dense, complex, generous, and loving memorial to a friend (our friend, John Bernd) lost too young to AIDS.

A galvanized and fragile dance moment in the city, in our careers, a beginning moment that held all of our dances at the time.

In discussing the "paradox of the authentic act," Slavoj Žižek wrote that "what is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act"—an emphatic moment of pure certainty, a thing *as it is*—"is forever out of our reach. The true trauma resides in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur and that we have to come to terms with them."¹ Sometimes artists, good artists, make shit happen! Period.

We have to come to terms with Ishmael. He is not going away. The master-provocateur, artist, performer, author, teacher, curator, his generous, fearless, and dangerous humanity. My shaman friend. I am so grateful that I have grown up with him.

[Writing from 2016]

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 135.

“My reason for dancing is because of what it feels like. I place one arm in time and space, check it against an awareness forming in another part of my body, note what I attend to, and proceed to bend, redirect, interrupt the references that rise up.” [B.M.]

Can You See How I See?

Bebe Miller

Humans are built on memory. We build our place in the world through how and what we remember. We move through the events we encounter according to our habits and perceptions, ricocheting and navigating through the familiar and unfamiliar by way of constant sensory information. We organize faces, postures, our relation to the weather and the political climate, aligning ourselves to the interior catalogue of events that we collate and regenerate through the course of our lives.

Dances—and dancers—are built by humans. The layers of remembered events we pass through daily become the fascial matrix of the form of the body, the form of an idea, form itself. We remember remembering, and find ourselves yet again at a point of becoming. Memory is the container; remembering is the action. For me, choreographing seems to be a way of revisiting small events in some weird, made-up way. I'm less interested in coming up with a different ending or turn of circumstance than in the chance to recrystallize a fleeting encounter. I stop time long enough to read it from the inside, from the flesh, from a distance. I fact-check my attention, choreographically: what's the rhythm, where's the focus, what's the next move, what can I interrupt.

Watching dancing goes along with making dances. The first time I saw Ralph Lemon dance (in the early 1980s?) he was maneuvering a flat cardboard car in the Cunningham studio in Westbeth, New York. I think he was wearing glasses. I also wore glasses, but it hadn't occurred to me to dance with them on in front of people. He put one kind of motion next to another (also) in ways that hadn't occurred to me. I felt a certain relief that he (also) did not seem to be translating a perspective assumed to be for black people. I enjoyed not knowing why he was doing what he was doing. I received it, didn't try to explain it, and kept an eye out for what else he might do. When I first saw Ishmael dance (also in the early 1980s) he was wearing an animal; perhaps he was also wearing his combat boots—I can't quite recall. He had worked up an intensely personal and pungent state that was mesmerizing. He moved wildly and carefully, and there was a hint of Twyla Tharp alongside the bushwhack—pretty terrific. I hadn't seen anyone become that transported since dancing during Yoruba *bembé* ceremonies in Queens in the 1960s.

My reason for dancing is because of what it feels like. I place one arm in time and space, check it against an awareness forming in another part of my body, note what I attend to, and proceed to bend, redirect, interrupt the references that rise up. I rearrange sensation, image, according to the form that emerges. I follow the timing between gestures, the tell, the rise of attention between people, the toss of their weight, the offhand smirk of a shoulder held in place a bit too long. Dancing holds many moments I've walked through before, but it's their



photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

[Left to right] Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Ralph Lemon at the performance of *Relations*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, November 2 & 3, 2018.

rearrangement rather than the retelling that most interests me. What I remember, what I carry with me, is what I measure the present moment against.

Earlier in my career, when I began to realize that people were paying attention to these dances we were making and coming back more than once to see what I was up to (even though I wasn't sure what I was up to), I was regularly asked about what perspective on the African diaspora I was sharing. Clearly my telling needed some translating. How to answer that?



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