

Katy Pyle in conversation with Marissa Perel

Interview Date: February 23, 2012

*Katy Pyle's The Firebird will be presented as part of the Brink series at Dixon Place, curated by Kimberly Brandt, Feb 28-29th. "I like playing with people. It's almost like a place in a person that resonates. It's like an intersection of fear and excitement, to me, laughter. And, confusion and not knowing! There's a lot of emotion in there. When you hit that chord, something's actually happening. There's a real response that's coming out."*

Marissa Perel: I am with Katy Pyle in her garden in Bushwick on February 23, 2012. Hi Katy!

Katy Pyle: Hi Marissa.

Marissa: You've been very busy lately.

Katy: It's true. Should I tell you what I was doing?

Marissa: Yeah, give us a recap.

Katy: Well, it seems like we just finished but it was about three weeks ago that we finished the run of *Untitled Feminist Show* with Young Jean Lee at Baryshnikov Arts Center, which we premiered in Minneapolis for a week and we did in New York for about four weeks. So, it was a lot of shows. And, I am gearing up to do a sort of excerpt, shortened version of *The Firebird* for Brink at Dixon Place on a shared bill with Diana Crum next Tuesday and Wednesday.

Marissa: And, it's a "Ballez"?

Katy: It's a Ballez. So, it's a redefined, more theatrical, and queered ballet. It takes a lot from ballet vocabulary, but it's exploring new gender roles, new gender identities, and features queer women, lesbians, and trans people. It's a Ballez.

Marissa: So, there's ballet in it?

Katy: There is ballet in it, yeah. I feel like, because it's this kind of new thing, I get to define what I want it to be. So, I am just taking all the things that I really liked about ballet, mainly these characters that are really magical and bright and fantastical, and movement that is fun to do and kind of exciting. It's contained, but it's not too contained. I have a "corps de Ballez" which are eight really hot, queer persons. And, that's what's similar about them: they are all hot and queer and have short hair. Other than that, they are really different. Their bodies are different and they're not the same height versus a traditional corps de ballet, where everyone's really encouraged to look exactly the same. We are playing with that sort of known form, having this group of people that are representing sameness, and just fucking with it.

Marissa: And you're in it?

Katy: I am the princess in the story. And, Jules Skloot is the Firebird, who is a tranimal. Cassie Mey is the Sorceress, who's like a dominatrix character. She's super hot and controls this whole group of the princes.

Marissa: What are the princes? Are they trans men? Are they men? Are they ladies?

Katy: They are all different. In some way, they are representing a performance of masculinity and I think that that really goes deeply for some people who are trans, and that's negotiable, you know, what is gender performance and what is just gender? We get a whole rainbow of different interpretations of that experience. I feel like, for Regina [Rocke], in working with her, she doesn't naturally dance in a way that's masculine at all. She's very feminine...

Marissa: I interviewed her [for Critical Correspondence] and she talked about that for her show at St. Mark's; how's she's actually a priss.

Katy: Yeah, totally. She's a self-proclaimed priss. I have had to say to her, "Regina, you can't stand with one leg bent in forced arch because you look like a Rockette when you do that! And, you don't look like a prince!" I feel like I had to coach more masculinity in her performance, but I also like that. She's putting it on. And, then, there are other people who are performing in it for whom it's really natural and it's the way they move through the world anyway.

Marissa: So, there are many different levels of performance in this show.

Katy: Yeah. There are a couple people: Jess Barbagallo and Arielle Goldberg, who are much more butch in their life. That's their identity. And, they're not really dancers but they have that butchness that I really wanted and they look amazing. So, they are filling out this other end of the spectrum.

Marissa: And are you a princessy princess?

Katy: Am I a princessy princess? I am like a princess on steroids, I would say. When my character comes across the tranimal, Jules, she keeps trying to pick him up and carry him around and almost have him as a pet but almost have power over him in a girly way of gaining power, but it's also very un-girl-like to be lifting this masculine identified person over your head and throwing him around. And, she's really asserting herself aggressively. It's more of a chase. The princess is really chasing the tranimal, which we don't necessarily associate with femininity and masculinity. And, she's a lesbian princess. She's recently divorced, you know. She's starting out on a journey away from this life of privilege and heteronormative culture to find what she really wants and what would really feel right for her. So, she goes into the woods [laughs]. That's where you go to figure things out.

Marissa: It is where you go to figure things out.

Katy: Yeah, I am quite attached to the woods as a place of learning and discovery and getting lost in order to find something.

Marissa: In listening to you describe the Ballez, I have been thinking about some parallels between your participation in *Untitled Feminist Show* and this work. But, in saying that, what I mean is it's who you are. I am not talking about the material from that show, but more of the way you work in the world. This is what you were dealing with in that show and now you're dealing with it in your own way in this show.

Katy: Yeah, I mean I definitely feel like I've been on this path for a lot longer than *The Untitled Feminist Show*. I would go back to my college drag king band. That was really the beginning of me thinking about performing gender, and camp, and discernible dance moves, kind of borrowing from the more traditional dance vocabularies, because Kitchen Sink was all hip hop and jazz, and that's what we did.

Marissa: And [Kitchen Sink] was the name of your band?

Katy: That was the drag king band which was with Isabel Lewis, Ann Liv Young, Gina Tai and Ashley Hitchcock. It was an incredible, weird group of people. I feel like that was an important thing that was over ten years ago. I feel like my work with Eleanor Hullihan was really thinking about performing femaleness also and what that meant. We were really portraying Amazons in a lot of what we did and just using our physical power, especially in "The Lady Centaur Show." And, again, working with these more discernible forms, like heavy metal. People have a relationship to that. And, we used a lot of weird jazz dance that we put this crazy, strong female horse energy on top of so it kind of became more than that. So, I feel like I brought a lot of that to the work I did with Young Jean Lee over the past year. And, it's weird because within a larger group of people, everyone's bringing these different things and changing the way your thing looks. You know what I mean? So, playing with those ideas with Eleanor Hullihan looks really different than playing with those ideas with Becca Blackwell, and what Becca brings to the table and Amelia and \*BOB\* and everybody. And, they all make work on their own also, so I really felt like that process was just bringing together all of our different styles of performance as well as our styles of creating to get to this hybrid thing. It was strange and new, but not so strange and new. And, then, coupling that with what Young Jean Lee likes to see and what interests her and what makes her excited.

Marissa: It was strange and new but it wasn't?

Katy: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that that's its weird power. To be kind of lulled into some sense of safety, like, "this is something that I know." And, to just change the roles a little bit, so that it can actually get under your skin, which is something she talked about a lot: trying to create a situation where the audience couldn't just immediately dismiss what we were doing and label it and put it away. I think some people were able to do that and go through that process. I think that the show was not successful if you had that experience. I think for a lot of people it did get under their skin.

Marissa: I think so too. I think through the presence of each of you, we were really able to see over time how you were inside of this work, regardless of what you were doing. I have a felt memory of your presence in performing more than I could take apart whether you were doing something that I thought was feminist or not. Or, what kind of feminist it would be. But, it's like trying to keep it alive for people who are scared vs. showing something new to people who are always engaged in that conversation.

Katy: Totally. I think it's weird to quote Young Jean Lee, but I do feel it's important. She talked a lot about how her process begins with the worst show she can think to do. That often means

something she knows very little about and she really came into this process not knowing about feminism in a deep way and really asking us to teach her. I feel like we had to pull out "The Idiot's Guide to Feminism." That's what we were making; we pulled out our best cards and were like, "This is what we've done, this is what we've found to be effective over the research in our lives." That's something I've been doing since [my time at] Hollins [University]. I was trying to figure out how to be proud of being strong in my body and being excited about that, and being able to shift through different ideas about gender and represent that in a way that felt real and not a joke.

Marissa: It seems like the role of humor was this thing to try and keep everybody involved in it. And, then, sometimes it was the thing that would make you question the investment in the idea. But, then it also operated on a level of leaving it up to the viewer whether they were going to believe in whatever stereotype was being represented, or if they have to go inside and ask themselves, "How am I watching her right now, really? What kind of assumptions do I put on someone?"

Katy: I don't think it would be funny at all if we didn't have assumptions that we were putting on the performers. It just wouldn't., you know? I feel like there's a prejudice against humor in the downtown dance community. And, beyond our community, I feel like "serious" art, like "real" art, shouldn't be funny. I am person who really loves laughing and making dumb jokes [laughs]. I like laughing. I like playing with people. It's almost like a place in a person that resonates. It's like an intersection of fear and excitement, to me, laughter. And, confusion and not knowing! There's a lot of emotion in there. When you hit that chord, something's actually happening. There's a real response that's coming out.

Marissa: How does camp work with that for you and your work?

Katy: Well, I feel like it's related to that idea that we bring a certain set of assumptions about bodies and about costumes and about the way people look and what does that mean about them? And, I feel like it's fun to me to play with that and I can be this princess. But, this the thing is that it is real for me. I do want to be wearing a super frilly high-necked Victorian laced dress and carrying a trans boy over my head. And, just the idea of that is ridiculous and campy but that is what I really want.

Marissa: On a side note, when I went to go see *Shame* there was a preview for a movie that Glenn Close was starring in as a drag male butler.

Katy: Is it *Albert Knobb's*?

Marissa: Yeah.

Katy: Yeah, I didn't see it I heard it was really depressing.

Marissa: I didn't see it because when I saw the preview I couldn't tell what it was trying to get at. It looks really straightforward but then there are these flares or hiccups of something else. And, I was like, "What audience is this for?" But your description of your high-necked Victorian collar made me think of that.

Katy: I think that setting could be really great. It's like the book, "Tipping the Velvet." That's great to me. That's a good setup. Camp to me is sexy and playtime and fun and it's really alive. And, someone had written to me recently about, if you ever do a really straightforward, canonical ballet, and you want trans men, let me know. And, I was like, "I'm never going to do that!" I don't imagine myself doing that. I don't want to do something straight. I don't want to do something straightforward. I want to change it. I want to remake this in my own image because I didn't see this when I was a little girl. And, I want there to be some other forms represented in the world. Obviously, I didn't pursue classical ballet beyond sixteen, you know. It wasn't doing it. And, I'm in this community now of people who are really remaking dance. I felt like this is my part of that greater movement right now. This is what I am doing right now.

Marissa: What if everyone accepted these identities, say, in the dance world? And, there could be a whole different look at gender in ballet than there is. Would that destroy the discipline?

Katy: It's interesting because I did a lot of research in the original making of the first *Firebird*. I read Fokine's journals and papers around when he was making it. He really felt like ballet was being destroyed at that time by the other ballet masters. He felt like they were fucking everything up. And, he was really not into turn-out, he was not into pointe shoes unless they really, really made sense for the character. He wasn't into all the tricks. He believed that dance should be representative of the person you're trying to represent or the culture you're trying to represent. He wasn't so into these codified steps. So, just knowing that gave me a sense of freedom in making

this because I was like, "Whoa, ballet as we think of it isn't even what it was in 1920!" We had this idea that ballet has been this thing that's existed since Louis XIV and it's been the same and it's been carried on; and, that's not true. It's a dance form that has had so many different incarnations. Fokine was influenced by Isadora Duncan and was really into her dancing and, at the same time, hated Martha Graham. I feel like there's always these reactionary relationships between dance forms and between different choreographers that kind of shape what people are making. I am outside of ballet in a serious way. I am not part of a ballet community but, at the same time, it's okay for me to be doing what I'm doing. I feel permission from myself and from history because I was trained in that [ballet]. Because I grew up as a dancer, this is the easiest way to choreograph that I can imagine. It flows out of me in the most easeful way that feels really good; the movement feels really good to my body. All the mathematics of it, of the form, make sense because I was trained to do this since I was three years old. So, it's not like trying to reinvent a new vocabulary or come up with something really weird that no one has ever done. It just feels like a language that I know well that I can use and use it to say what I want to say. It is really personal and that is representative of the types of people that I want to see. I want to see trans men dancing, I want to see butch women dancing, I want to see gender queer outlaws pointing their feet and jumping around and everybody doing it together [laughs].

Marissa: In the forest...

Katy: Yeah, it's in the forest but it's a shared history for the people that I am working with. We grew up in these dance studios, we grew up with these ballets, we grew up thinking about these things and absorbing ideas that were in the ballet studio that were also in the culture at large. We can all play together. We know the rules and we know what the edges of it are. And, we can all play in there. Because we're all coming from some part of this queer perspective, what gets made is totally a different thing and it has a different soul.