

Fort Blossom revisited (2000/2012)

Choreography and Visual Design:

John Jasperse

Performers:

Ben Asriel, Lindsay Clark,
Erika Hand, and Burr Johnson

Original Sound Mix:

Michael Floyd

Music:

Ryoji Ikeda, Calin and The Plastic
Fantastic

Original Lighting Design:

Stan Pressner

Original Costume Construction: Deanna Berg

Original Roles created by: Miguel Gutierrez, Parker Lutz, Juliette Mapp and Jasperse



Touring Staff: 7 persons (1 artistic director, 4 dancers, 1 tour manager & 1 technician)

Performances

Premiere: February 24-26, 2012 Bryn Mawr College Performing Arts Series, Bryn Mawr, PA

May 9-12, 2012, New York Live Arts, New York, NY

June 15-16, 2012, The Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, Burlington, VT

Description:

Fort Blossom, choreographed and designed by Jasperse, is a 40-minute work that premiered in 2000 at The Kitchen with original performers Miguel Gutierrez, John Jasperse, Parker Lutz, and Juliette Mapp. The work was revisited and expanded into a 60-minute work for four performers Ben Asriel, Lindsay Clark, Erin Cornell, and Burr Johnson.

Fort Blossom revisited (2000/2012) is a personal look at the body (alternately medical, eroticized and/or aestheticized). The audience is invited to examine contemporary notions of how we experience the body as both owners and spectators. (Note: the work includes full male nudity).

Press Quotes:

“Jasperse’s new *Fort Blossom* – like its name, [is] both severe and tender... The contrasts ... are dazzling: black and white, color and neutral tones, men and women, nakedness and body coverings, intimacy in bloom and tough, blocky structures.” – Deborah Jowitt, *The Village Voice*, June 2000

“*Fort Blossom* suggests an uninhibited search for a new direction, not yet defined... The chaste and the clinical go together in *Fort Blossom*... Jasperse incorporates emotional images into overt structures.” – Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*, June 2000

Project Funders:

Fort Blossom revisited (2000/2012) is reconstructed with lead support from Bryn Mawr College, funded by The Pew of Center for Arts & Heritage through Dance Advance; and is made possible by support from the National Endowment for the Arts and contributors to the Dance Theater Workshop Commissioning Fund at New York Live Arts. *Fort Blossom* revisited (2000/2012) is being developed in residencies at Baryshnikov Art Center and Bryn Mawr College.

John Jasperse is a dance artist living and working in NYC since graduating from Sarah Lawrence College in 1985. In 1989, he established John Jasperse Company, later re-named John Jasperse Projects to better reflect the nature of the organization's ongoing work as a project-based production structure. In 1996, Jasperse created Thin Man Dance, Inc., a non-profit structure that supports the work of John Jasperse Projects (JJP).

John Jasperse's work has been presented by festivals and presenting organizations in the U.S. including The American Dance Festival, Durham, NC; Diverseworks, Houston, TX; The Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, Burlington, VT; Museum of Contemporary Arts, Chicago, IL; On the Boards, Seattle, WA; Philadelphia Live Arts, PA; Summer Stages, Concord, MA; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA; and internationally in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Israel, Japan, Panama, Russia and throughout Europe including La Biennale di Venezia; Cannes International Dance Festival; Dance Umbrella, London; EuroKaz, Zagreb; Kampnagel, Hamburg; Montpellier Danse; Tanz im August, Berlin; TanzQuartier Wein; Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt; and the VEO Festival, Valencia. In NYC, JJP has been presented at numerous venues including The Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, Dance Theater Workshop, Danspace Project, The Joyce Theater, The Kitchen, New York Live Arts and Performance Space 122.

Through the aegis of JJP, Jasperse has created sixteen evening-length works: *Within between* (2014), *Fort Blossom revisited* (2000/2012), *Canyon* (2011), *Truth, Revised Histories, Wishful Thinking, and Flat Out Lies* (2009), *Misuse liable to prosecution* (2007), *Becky, Jodi, and John* (2007), *Prone* (2005), *CALIFORNIA* (2003), *just two dancers* (2003), *Giant Empty* (2001), *Madison as I imagine it* (1999), *Waving to you from here* (1997), *Excessories* (1995), *furnished/unfurnished* (1993), *Eyes Half Closed* (1991), and *Rickety Perch* (1989), as well as various shorter works including *PURE* (2008), *Fort Blossom* (2000), and *Scrawl* (1999) and projects in collaboration with other artists.

Jasperse has created several works for other companies: *See Through Knot*, commissioned by the Baryshnikov Dance Foundation for White Oak's Dance Project (2000); *The Rest*, commissioned by the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv, Israel (2000); *à double face* for the Lyon Opéra Ballet, France (March 2002); *missed FIT* for The Irish Modern Dance Theater, Dublin, Ireland (October 2002); *Highline*, as a part of the Montana Suite Project for Headwaters Dance Company, Missoula, MT (2007); and *Spurts of Activity Before the Emptiness of Late Afternoon* for Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company, Salt Lake City, UT (2010).

Jasperse's work has received several prestigious awards including a 2014 Doris Duke Artist Award; two New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award—in 2014 for Outstanding Production for *Within between* and in 2000 in recognition of his body of choreographic work; a 2011 US Artists Brooks Hopkins Fellowship; a 2011 Greenroom Award, Melbourne, Australia; a 1999 Scripps/ADF Primus-Tamaris Fellowship; a 1998 Doris Duke Award; the 1997 Mouson Award by Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt, Germany; three prizes in the 1996 Rencontres Internationales Chorégraphiques de Bagnolet; and the Choreography Prize at the 3rd Suzanne Dellal International Dance Competition (1996) in Tel Aviv, Israel. Jasperse has also received fellowships from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts (2003), Tides Foundation's Lambent Fellowship in the Arts (2004-2007), John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1998), National Endowment for the Arts (1992, 1994, 1995-96) and New York Foundation for the Arts (1988, 1994, 2000 and 2010).

JJP has been supported by grants from Altria Group, Inc., American Music Center Live Music for Dance Program, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Arts International, Bossak/Heilbron Charitable Foundation, Creative Capital Foundation, Dance Magazine Foundation, Fonds d'Aide à la Production Chorégraphique du Conseil Général de Seine-Saint-Denis (France), Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Greenwall Foundation, Harkness Foundation for Dance, Heathcote Art Foundation, Jerome Foundation, James E. Robison Foundation, Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Meet the Composer, Multi-Arts Production Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, National Performance Network, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts BUILD program, New York State Council on the Arts, Lila Acheson Wallace Theater Fund established in New York Community Trust by the founders of The Reader's Digest Association, and Trust for Mutual Understanding.

Jasperse is a co-founder of CPR – Center for Performance Research, Inc. Through subsidized rehearsal rentals, residencies, performances and other public fora, CPR supports research and development in dance, performance and allied fields. CPR is located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

DanceBeat

Deborah Jowitt on bodies in motion

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Consider the Body

May 16, 2012 by [Deborah Jowitt](#) [3 Comments](#)



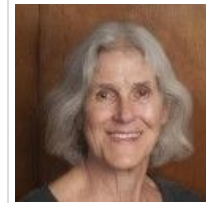
Burr Johnson and Benjamin Asriel (seated) in John Jasperse's *Fort Blossom revisited*. Photo: Ian Douglas

Maybe this is something you haven't scrutinized before; maybe it's a familiar sight. But I imagine you haven't noticed an asshole in quite this way. To begin John Jasperse's *Fort Blossom revisited*, Benjamin Asriel begins an arduous trek on his belly across the floor of New York Live Arts; arms at his sides, he undulates along by a smooth process of humping and arching. Depending on where you're sitting, you may notice that the action makes the crack between his buttocks widen and narrow rhythmically. Among the several thoughts this image can evoke is this: it's like watching a bivalve at work underwater.

Fort Blossom isn't the first piece in which Jasperse has juxtaposed hot material to cool form with an aim to discomfit us. In a memorable sequence in his earlier *Excessories*, two men and two women, standing shoulder to shoulder, blank-faced, opened their jackets or flies, took out their genitals or breasts, and made them dance in fastidious synchrony. *Fort Blossom* (expanded from its 2000 version) confronts us more obliquely with questions about the way we look at dancers in performance, in particular, the erotic reaction we may indulge in or suppress. He also invites us to compare dressed bodies with unclothed ones, male with females, controlled actions with spontaneous ones, and individuals with pairs with a group.

As Asriel worms his way across the two-toned floor from its white half onto the black part, designer Stan Pressner initially bathes his pale body in almost mortuary light—a moving anatomy lesson. When he arrives at his destination and halts, Burr Johnson, also naked, rises from the large, square, clear plastic pillow he's been draped over, advances on Asriel, lays the pillow over him, and lies on top of both. Then he pulls the plug on the pillow and, by grinding his pelvis, causes it to deflate. You could think of the pillow as a mega-condom, but also as a disappearing barrier. Or you could define the whole stack as a surreal machine and focus on the two women who have been taming their own pillows on the white area of the stage.

DEBORAH JOWITT



Deborah Jowitt began to dance professionally in 1953, to choreograph in 1961, and to write about dancing in 1967. [Read More...](#)

DANCEBEAT

This blog acknowledges my appetite for devouring dancing and spitting out responses to it. Criticism that I love to read—and have been struggling to write ever since the late 1960s—probes deeply and imaginatively into choreography and dancing, ... [\[Read More...\]](#)

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(L to R) Erika Hand and Lindsay Clark. Photo: Ian Douglas

Jasperse has overturned the prevalent vision of female nudity in painting. Think of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, with its two smartly clad gentlemen picknickers and a naked woman who looks out at us from the canvas, with a half-clad woman bathing in a stream. Lindsay Clark and Erika Hand wear short, long-sleeved, loose-fitting, rust-red dresses in a stretch jersey. As they settle down on orange-tinted ottomans, the plastic emits unruly squeaks and mild groans. To dance, the women snap the pillows on like backpacks.

When I first saw the re-vamped *Fort Blossom* at Bryn Mawr College, I was in Philadelphia to lead sessions of the ThinkingDance Project. Afterward the participants reviewed and discussed the performance. The word "robotic" came up frequently in descriptions of the women, also "stewardesses." I think the latter image has something to do with the costumes, but also the straight-armed or angled gestures that Clark and Hand perform in unison could call to mind those airplane pantomimes that point out exits and the intricacies of seatbelts. As the women, perfectly synchronized, angle their bodies and fall back and swing their arms, they sometimes invest their gazes with traces of emotion (fear perhaps) that bely the preciseness that makes us think "robot." Or perhaps: "retro-futuristic."



Entangled: Johnson on Asriel. Photo: Ian Douglas

One of the selections from recordings by Ryogi Ikeda kicks in with a loud buzzing as the women unsnap their cushions and lie side by side beneath them—a contrast to the men's more intimate rest-period after all the air has gone out of their pillow sandwich. But the buzz disappears and the lights change when the mens's duet begins. Here your gaze falters, keeps switching gears. The

Thanks

Posted Feb 17, 2014



Deborah Jowitt on [New Trails for Traditions](#)

Christopher Pilafian sent this comment via e-mail: Deborah, As always, a pleasure to read your lucid and layered descriptions of events. I...

Posted Feb 11, 2014



Deborah Jowitt on [Jewels in the City's Crown](#)

I'm glad that Jeff Morris challenged my mention of the cimbalom. I obviously misread the NYCB's program information, and...

Posted Jan 28, 2014



Jeff Morris on [Jewels in the City's Crown](#)

Does the NYCB orchestra really use a cimbalom when performing Stravinsky's score? I wasn't aware that it was part...

Posted Jan 28, 2014



sandi kurtz on [Jewels in the City's Crown](#)

I do love Emeralds best of the three, but after seeing a number of performances of Diamonds as a stand-alone...

Posted Jan 26, 2014

men are art objects, like the beautiful ephebes portrayed in Greek statuary, and they move slowly and unemotionally through a smooth sequence of shifting tableaux.

Jasperse plumbs the subtle shading that some say distinguishes nudity from nakedness. Asriel and Johnson don't move in ways that would conceal their genitals or anuses (buttocks are indeed prominent—perching on feet, grazing shoulders), and the choreography gives us time to feel the sensuousness of, say, Asriel's butt sliding down the slanted arm that Johnson, seated on the floor, braces for him. Gravely and considerably, the two work at interlocking their bodies and limbs in unusual and intricate ways that are never explicitly sexual. Sometime one levers the other off the ground. The sequence is beautifully designed—gradually increasing its pace and expanding in space; occasionally Jasperse breaks the tension by having one of the partners drop out of a maneuver with an audible thump as he moves to a new position. Once, near the end of the duet, the two look each other in the face for the first time. It may be the most provocative moment of all.



At play (L to R): Clark, Johnson, Asriel. Photo: Ian Douglas

I can't decipher the atmosphere in the theater. Are some of the gazes prurient? Are some of the viewers turned on? Are many simply rapt, hypnotized? In any case, Jasperse changes our perspective. Wielding four pillows, the performers turn what seems like an accidental collision into a game of racing around smacking into one another. The horseplay is surely improvised. They attempt individual feats with the props, many of which fail; they laugh; we laugh. The music turns raucous (do I hear a samba?). Some of the players are naked, some are clothed. So what?

Jasperse isn't through with comparisons. The dancers pair up, again by gender, in double duets that explore variants of choreography we've already seen. It's no surprise that the dresses not only shield the women from each other, they blur and minimize the intimacy of the movements (it makes me wonder what a traditional ballet pas de deux would convey were both partners naked). Jasperse rings all kinds of changes on his theme. The men dance with the women (now the duets seem slightly more manipulative). You see couples in unison, in canon, and in two different but related dances, separated in space. Your eye travels around, parsing similarities, parsing differences. The selection of Ikeda's music is almost hymn-like.



Johnson and Clark. Photo: Ian Douglas

In the final sequence, the four work in a chain—sometimes side by side, sometimes pressed together into a caterpillar, sometimes linked. Equality and individuality are the new norms. One may break away and rejoin; another may start something the others pick up. Always their behavior is serene, controlled, amicable, workmanlike. This is who they are; this is what they do.

At the end, the brave, very gifted performers simply step out of the dance and bow. No lights out so the men can reappear with their private parts covered. That practice has always struck me as awkward; the performer distances himself or herself from the previous nakedness, which serves to confirm the shocking aspect of public nudity. Asriel and Johnson were/are naked. I like it that Jasperse stirs things up—risking our discomfort (or worse). With exquisite precision, he challenges us to consider how we view not just these dancers, but all dancing bodies.

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05/16/12 10:14 AM | filed under: [postmodern views](#) |

Comments

sandi kurtz says:

May 17, 2012 at 12:52 am



“two men and two women, standing shoulder to shoulder, blank-faced, opened their jackets or flies, took out their genitals or breasts, and made them dance in fastidious synchrony.”

I seem to recall a dance critic saying that you can't really choreograph for a penis...

REPLY

Deborah Jowitt says:

May 17, 2012 at 2:12 am



Yep, that was me (except my exact title was “You Can't Choreograph a Penis”).
You can, I guess, choreograph with it.

Fort Blossom Revisited – an essay by Suzanne Carbonneau

Posted **January 28th, 2012** at 3:34 pm.

*In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the making of heroes.*

—Walt Whitman

John Jasperse is a distinctly philosophical choreographer. His dances have served as potent vehicles for existential exploration, posing a series of thorny questions that very often lead to thorny conclusions. He has shown nerves of steel in following these inquiries from work to work, wherever they might lead and however disquieting the investigation proves to be. Jasperse has proved so indispensable an artist precisely because he insists on examining those issues that make us most uneasy. In directing us to look in those places we might naturally shy from, Jasperse has served as truth-teller in an era when the very notion of truth seems endangered by ideology, benightedness, and wishful thinking.

Jasperse recognizes that discomfort is triggered by what is unknown and that the aesthetic remedy is to spelunk where the caves are darkest and deepest. Afflict thyself, might be his motto. Jasperse's dances lodge in those places others flee: habitually, he begins by forcing himself to examine a subject or condition that he himself finds disturbing. Indeed, Jasperse imagines that it is the responsibility of the artist to engage in psychic dumpster diving, with the artist's consciousness as first mark. In addition to the difficult content, he complicates matters with the admonition that he also face the aesthetic unknown. In continuously reimagining the tradition he has been handed, Jasperse engages with another kind of tradition—the avant-garde charge that the artist muscle ahead of the culture, bringing back discoveries to share with viewers and not infrequently disconcerting them in the process. "If I give an audience an experience they've already imagined," Jasperse declares, "then I'm not doing my job." Discomfiting himself, discomfiting us. It's double-barreled target-practice.

This revival of *Fort Blossom* is no exception. Once again, Jasperse is an aesthetic fireman, running toward the conflagration. In this work, Jasperse has challenged himself to re-examine notions concerning the fundamental stuff of dance: the body and movement. He begins by foregrounding body parts usually subsumed in western dance: the back, the soles of the feet, the genitalia. In *Fort Blossom*, Jasperse pays special attention to the buttocks and its interior. The resulting movement redefines beauty entirely: celebrating inelegance, awkwardness, unexpectedness. And in the process, Jasperse reveals just how profoundly concert dance—even in its contemporary experimental manifestation—is snared in unexamined premises about its own nature.

Outsiders might be forgiven for assuming that, as an artform centered in the sensuous, professional dance practice is inherently erotic. But as Jasperse says, dancers "have been trained to compartmentalize" their bodily experiences. In fact, in American modern dance sexuality is implicitly banished from the studio, just as medical doctors, for example, are trained to objectify what might arouse others. It is characteristic of

Jasperse, however, that he does not allow even these basic assumptions to go unchallenged. How well does this work in practice, he wondered? And where does the viewer fit into the schema?

In *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012*, Jasperse faces these issues with characteristic mettle and candor—examining the body as it has been the subject of art history, of pornography, and of clinical study. These are questions that Jasperse has been tackling since he first made his international reputation with *Excessories*, a work he created nearly two decades ago. But the acclaim it brought was paradoxical. Jasperse had created *Excessories* in reaction against the uneasy relationship that theatrical dance had with its audiences. He was troubled that there was a “pornographic vision” being applied to concert dance—that is, spectators could objectify the fit young bodies of performers while cloaking prurience under the guise of art. In response, Jasperse brought the lascivious subtext into the open, challenging himself to use nudity and sadomasochistic conventions to reveal the reality of the theatrical transaction. While Jasperse’s critique in *Excessories* was extraordinarily legible, many viewers brushed this reading aside in favor of the opportunities for further titillation that the dance offered. In a way, Jasperse realized, *Excessories* had backfired. Or so he then thought.

A commission to work in Israel got him rethinking whether *Excessories* actually had miscarried its mission. At the Batsheva Dance Company, Jasperse discovered a culture unlike that in experimental American dance. Among the Batsheva dancers, there was lightness and a sense of play around sexuality, and the dancers allowed natural eroticism into their experience of artmaking. Jasperse drew the lesson that the diligent creation of aesthetic form and content is an invitation to the viewer, but that he could not control the response of his audiences. They would bring their own desires, intentions, and critical processes to the work he presented. And Jasperse began to regard this not as the problem he had imagined it to be in *Excessories*, but as inherent in the excitement of artmaking.

He determined again to tackle the questions he had raised in *Excessories*, but this time more plainly and aggressively. The result was *Fort Blossom*. In creating the original version in 2000, Jasperse employed the nudity that had proved so vexing in *Excessories*, but, with his newly found acceptance of perceptual differences, in a more direct and pointed way. In acknowledgment of the troubled history around the female nude in western art and pornography, where women have been objectified, co-opted, and consumed, Jasperse reversed expectations. He divided his cast by gender: the men would be naked, the women would be clothed. And he embedded this dichotomy in the movement, structure, and design of the entire work, bifurcating the compositional strategies and stage space, devising an antinomic title.

As he worked on *Fort Blossom*, what Jasperse found of interest, however, were not these obvious polarities, but the ways that the dualistic experiences seemed to raise more questions. In the movement, for example, Jasperse created what he presumed would be a clear distinction: the unison movement for the women is outwardly directed and dispassionate, while that for the men emphasizes proprioception and sensation. But is one mode truly more experiential than the other? Is one less inherently aesthetic? Under close inspection, Jasperse realized, the answers were not obvious and what he thought he knew seemed to fall away. Jasperse was thrilled by the disruption of

expectation, by the idea that experience is more complicated than we assume. “That’s art, right there,” Jasperse professes, “you can’t hope for more.”

Fort Blossom is an example, then, of a prime Jasperse precept: art is an ignition for discovery. As he proceeds through his career, Jasperse follows the imperative to question what tradition—even the seemingly up-to-the-minute tradition of contemporary dance—means at this exact moment. “We have to keep living the experience,” Jasperse affirms. If he has given an audience the world as they’ve already imagined it, Jasperse believes, he has not fulfilled his role. He hopes, rather, that his choreography has provided opportunity for a shift in assumption and mindset, testing ideas with the empirical evidence of the body.

Jasperse does not cycle his repertory and this is the first time in his career that he has revived choreography after such a long lapse. But *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* is no mere reconstruction. In looking again at *Fort Blossom* twelve years on, Jasperse follows his dictum of continuous progression. Jasperse is taking the opportunity to re-work and expand the choreography and, to his delight, finds himself grappling with the unexpected. *Fort Blossom* had a limited run in 2000, but its reputation was enormous: word went out that Jasperse had created a bold exploration of our creaturely natures, willing to show what hadn’t been seen before on a dance stage. How to achieve the same effect after more than a decade of cultural evolution? In revisiting the work, Jasperse finds that there are multiple layers of time embedded in the dance, that, as he says, *Fort Blossom* looks “retro-futuristic, a dated version of the future,” rather like Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. To contemporize the work, Jasperse feels the need to up the ante as he re-examines and re-crafts the material. Where in 2000, *Fort Blossom* had “dipped its toe into the water,” Jasperse contends that *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* will take “a big dunk.”

Jasperse has not found that same anachronism at issue in the visual character of *Fort Blossom*. If anything, the original conception seems prescient. In its 2000 iteration, Jasperse deliberately chose an aesthetic of what he terms “maximum economy of means.” Its stark and simple design was singular in Jasperse’s body of work, which typically features striking décor and lighting he has taken an active hand in creating. His *arte povera* choice, which he is retaining in *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012*, could not be more timely for an economy ravaged by greed and fecklessness. It is of a philosophical piece with Jasperse’s *Misuse liable to prosecution* (2007), in which—a year before the worldwide financial crisis had detonated—he celebrated the makeshift as a fertile creative state.

For all of his experimentation, Jasperse is, at heart, a formalist. His success in engaging with audacious content resides in the anchorage of his choreography in impeccable craftsmanship. Jasperse honors his subjects with finely wrought forms, carving out facets to catch the light at different angles, as do stones honed by a master diamond cutter. He gives signal attention to the poetics of structure. Embedded in pristine architecture—rich in organization while devoid of ornamentation—the works are enlivened by Jasperse’s fecund movement invention. With its manifestly schematic design, *Fort Blossom* evidences Jasperse’s masterly eye in every detail.

Ultimately, however, Jasperse’s work is about ethics as much as aesthetics. For in

addition to its daring content and extraordinary technical accomplishment, *Fort Blossom revisited 2000/2012* radiates humanistic intelligence. Revealing those experiences of our bodies that we conceal even from ourselves is an act of honesty and generosity, reminding us that we share the pleasures, pains, embarrassments, joys, and befuddlements of universal human experience. In foregrounding the act of perception, moreover, Jasperse calls our attention in equal measure to what is individual and what is shared. It's a perfect metaphor for democracy. Jasperse's performers model the manners with which we might engage one another—with clear intention, patience, sensitivity, and a sincere attempt to communicate. And in a culture so ideologically riven, it feels no small gift—relief and release—to find rapport in the fundamental commonality of our bodies.

Suzanne Carbonneau is a critic, essayist, and historian whose writings have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other publications. She has been Director of the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Dance, Critic-in-Residence at the American Dance Festival and Scholar-in-Residence at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and the Bates Dance Festival. She lectures and writes for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Ms. Carbonneau holds a Ph.D. from New York University and is Professor of Performance at George Mason University. Her biography of choreographer Paul Taylor will be published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

Intimacy's Many Facets

John Jasperse's 'Fort Blossom' at New York Live Arts



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

"Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)": featuring, from left, Erika Hand, Lindsay Clark, Ben Asriel and Burr Johnson at New York Live Arts.

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

Published: May 10, 2012

The form of dance theater that the choreographer [John Jasperse](#) develops in "Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)" is often astonishing. Watching Wednesday's premiere, I was several times left with the sensation of having traveled to unknown terrain. The piece is an expanded 70-minute reworking of his "Fort Blossom" (2000). (We should not spend time figuring out what the title might mean.)

"Fort Blossom revisited" features four performers who remain onstage more or less throughout, and it's constructed according to binary principles. The two women (Lindsay Clark and Erika Hand) are elegantly dressed in long-sleeved short red dresses, with subtly

matching lipstick. The two men (Ben Asriel and Burr Johnson) are, however, naked. For a long period the women are together on the left, the men on the right. The dualism that develops between their two different worlds is extraordinary.

Something they do have in common is transparent vinyl inflatables. The two women have matching amber boxlike ones on which they sit and which they later wear on their backs like wings. Initially on the right there is a single large inflatable, like a small see-through Li-Lo: which, several inches thick, is for a long while all that separates the two men, as one lies horizontally on top of the other. The two men, in profile to us, move their pelvises in rhythm. We're watching a deconstruction of anal sex. The balloon, by separating their two bodies, has the effect of objectifying the movement. Then, after they have lain in stillness for a long, long while (itself an amazing spectacle), they deflate it until it is just the sheath between them. By the time they finally separate and peel it away, it's become a metaphor for a condom.

It's conventional — and often true — to say that the effect of presenting a performer naked onstage is to de-eroticize the body. But the erotic suggestiveness of Mr. Jasperse's movement makes this scene far more complex; I imagine most viewers find, as I did, that the erotic and nonerotic aspects of the scene keep changing.

There follows a slow male duet that is often even more mesmerizing — and yet more astounding. Only once do the two men hold each other's eyes; only once, I think, do their naked groins meet. But their intimacy of contact is amazing. The cheek of one man's face is pressed tenderly to the cheek of the other's buttock. One man crouches on all fours while the other arches right back on top, lying on him back to back. Most of these positions and movements would count for little if they were danced with clothes on, and for less if performed by man and woman. Here, and especially because of the slowness, they become a rare form of drama.

Something else happens during all this: which is that our perception of and response to the body itself continually develops, alters, shifts. As

these men part their legs, shift their pelvises, ripple their spines, there's little we don't know about their groins. And their bodies as a whole keep taking on new looks as we go on watching. It helps that Mr. Asriel's soft-muscled body is unlike the firmer definition of Mr. Johnson. The flow of lines in the abdomen, the back, the pelvis, the leg is wholly dissimilar in each case — and marvelously absorbing.

The duets for the women, though less enthralling, are more dancy and have a wry formality, not without absurdity (those balloons), that makes a perfect contrast to what's happening between the guys on the right. The women bend their spines, they extend their legs, they sustain specific arm positions, and yet there's a quality of pedestrianism to all they do.

Later the two couples meet. Some of this involves a happy sense of play — as the women thwack the men with those balloons, they keep redirecting them — and some of it involves more conventionally choreographic patterns, groups, lines. Yet conventionality has been removed by the nakedness of the two men. Arabesques, tilts of the torso, semicircular swings of the leg — these are simply not the same when two of the pelvises involved are naked.

It's very possible that "Fort Blossom revisited" would be largely unremarkable if all four performers wore the same clothes. I refer to it as dance theater, but should I? Its four performers are certainly trained dancers, sometimes delivering academic dance position and steps, often showing evident physical control. But the steps don't build into much by way of phrases; dancing itself seems to be deconstructed here. Yet meanings, ideas, contrasts, drama, keep growing as you watch. Dance, the body, and erotics are topics about which "Fort Blossom revisited" keeps testing, investigating and analyzing, and often brilliantly. Leaving the theater we are no longer quite what we were when we arrived.

"Fort Blossom revisited (2000/12)" runs through Saturday at New York Live Arts, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077, newyorklivearts.org.

Quick Q&A: John Jasperse

January 2013 – By Wendy Perron

On dancemaking as “an estheticized puzzle”

As part of the FOCUS series at New York’s Joyce Theater in January (see “New York Notebook,” p. 38), John Jasperse’s company will perform Fort Blossom revisited (2000/2012), which features male nudity front and center. The piece focuses not on the display of the male body but on the interaction between two dancers. There are no dance-y phrases, but rather a constant maneuvering of intimate body parts against other dancers’ bodies as well as with big, clear plastic cushions. Both the premiere in 2000 (original roles created by Miguel Gutierrez, Parker Lutz, Juliette Mapp, and Jasperse) and the reworking in 2012 (with Ben Asriel, Lindsay Clark, Erika Hand, and Burr Johnson) were met with acclaim and buzz. Dance Magazine’s Wendy Perron caught up with Jasperse last October, while he was making a piece for students at Harvard University.



Photo of John Jasperse courtesy FOCUS.

Why did you choose to revive *Fort Blossom*? I started to feel a certain regret or nostalgia toward this very simple and clear statement that was in *Fort Blossom*, but I felt like I had never finished it.

Did you know how you wanted to rework it? There was a sense of play that I wanted to access. There was a hint in the original version, but it never actually happened, so it was kind of exciting to feel like I managed to finish that.

How come the two women weren’t nude? Originally I felt like all four of us would be naked, but Parker and Juliette refused to do it. That brought a lot of confusion into the process. But then I was like, OK, well that’s what it’s about. The history of the objectification of the female body by the gaze of the man as author or artist is pretty heavy. That was tricky for me to navigate anyway, so I understood why they made that decision.



Jasperse's Fort Blossom revisited (2000/2012). Photo by Chris Taggart, Courtesy Jasperse.

You have a definite way of organizing movement, like this fits in here and that fits in there. I wonder if you think of the body as a puzzle. That's part of it. Here is this body, and this part is round and that part's concave and how the concave and the convex fit together—it's an aesthetic construction, an estheticized puzzle. But then there's that moment where the slightest thing shifts and suddenly you see a sexualized body and you have to ask, What was it that suddenly changed it? And then, Why suddenly when I look at it I'm really aware of things like defecating and urinating and getting sick and dying, that's largely a medical relationship to the body? My perception continues even *now* to slide around.

In every art-making experience that involves the public, you're handing over this space of perception and you aren't in control of it. And the interesting thing is the way in which it slides from one axis to another. For some people I think the men's duet still holds a kind of transgressive taboo, which is curious to me because we all have a butt and we all go to the bathroom. Those are universal things that bind us together. We eat and we poop. But maybe we don't need to be so uncomfortable about it. Nobody likes changing a diaper, but there's a way in which we can conceive of the changing of the diaper as an act of caring. That disappears once it's no longer a baby and a mom; or maybe it returns at the end of life again. But through the middle of life, it is private and therefore tinted with shame.

In the men's rehearsals, what was the biggest hazard? Floor burns [*laughs*]. You can get a nasty floor burn, and you don't really want one on the side of your butt.

Were your dancers cool with the nudity right from the start? We managed to create an environment where it felt more or less normal, a non-event. If it becomes an event for us, then it becomes a big event for the public, and a big part of the piece is getting over it as an event.

Did you make adjustments with the new cast? Oh, yeah. The men's duet was made through improvisation. The original score was about sensation with the butt, almost like a contact improv score but with a different part of the body, opening up the comfort to the sensation shifting around in the same way the perception would. It was important for Ben and Burr to have that same kind of trajectory and not just treat it like steps. And, in the second, more playful half of the piece there's a lot of shift in the choreography.

What do you look for in a dancer? It helps to have some information about weight, about partnering, to be able to have a mobile spine. But I'm also interested in people who demonstrate a curiosity in their dancing. I want to work with people who are generous and humble. You feel that in the rehearsal studio, and I can see that in the way they perform.