



CAEN AMOUR

INTERVIEW WITH TRAJAL HARRELL

Your creation *Caen Amour* focuses on the hoochie coochie. What's that?

Trajal Harrell: I became interested in the hoochie coochie as part of my research about the way women move, in particular those movements that haven't been recorded by history, that had little to no visibility. The hoochie coochie goes back to the Chicago World Fair, in 1893, during which a Syrian dancer nicknamed Little Egypt made a splash by performing a dance that corresponded to what one might at the time picture of an exotic orientalist ballet. In the following years, it was imitated throughout the United States by itinerant circus performers. Hoochie coochie shows quickly evolved towards the burlesque or the peep show. The practice endured until the 1980s. But I also have a personal connection to the hoochie coochie. When I was a child in the state of Georgia, my father would take me every fall to the funfair. Often, after buying me a toffee apple or a bag of sweets, he would enter a tent, alone. I had to wait outside and play with my friends without knowing what my father was up to. One day, I must have been ten, I realised that a poster with a naked woman on it pointed to the entrance of the tent. I understood then that he went in to see naked women dance. I've remembered that experience as my first encounter with dance as a show.

Why are you interested in that practice?

I believe that this popular expression, like many others, contributed to the construction of modern dance. In 2008, in my show *Quartet for the end of times*—the first one I created in France—I'd already worked on the relationship between the hoochie coochie, nakedness, and postmodern dance. What I'm interested in is that critical moment when dance hasn't yet become a performing art, where the border between artistic, popular, and commercial practices remains blurry. I'm not doing the work of a historian, I'm not trying to document or reconstitute a phenomenon. The premise that there would be a connection between the hoochie coochie and modern dance is a construction, a proposition. Even though I've never witnessed a hoochie coochie show myself.

Through the hoochie coochie, you also talk about themes that recur in your work, like femininity.

While it has a connection to my personal history, the hoochie coochie also allows me to work on themes that are dear to me: the work of women, femininity, clothing, and orientalism. Clothes are the ultimate tool of performance. In the show, the performers both wear and carry them, on their bodies and in their arms, in front of them. This work on clothes is present in most of my shows; they're not just costumes, but are part of the dramaturgy in their own right. In a previous solo, *The Return of Argentina*, I'd already made the choice of having my costumes be in front of me, of suspending them rather than wearing them, in order to leave a place for imagination between the character and the performer. It was all the more important because it was an homage to Kazuo Ohno, himself paying homage in turn to the great Spanish dancer Antonia Merce—known as La Argentina—in his show *Admiring La Argentina*.

The set-up of *Caen Amour* is very unique. What relationship are you trying to build with the audience?

I'd already experimented with giving the audience a unique place, allowing them to move through the space of the show, but I'd never offered them to go see what's going on behind the stage. The set looks like a doll's house; in fact, the way the performers use clothes can bring to mind children's games, like cut out clothes. What I think is important at the theatre is to imagine something together, in the same place. Nevertheless, the show remains different for everyone. And by moving through the space, everyone plays a part in creating the show. The audience, without knowing exactly what's going on, contribute to the creation of the hoochie coochie show they're watching.

Voguing is also a recurring theme in your work. What about *Caen Amour*?

The relationship between voguing and postmodern dance is the real starting point, the basis of my creative work. I started this research on voguing and runway shows in 1999. It was very new back then. Since I was the only one working on that concept, on the unique and unexpected ties in the history of dance, I was able to develop a style, a formal strategy. The aesthetics of the fashion show, of the runway, allowed me to study, to dramatise different types of femininity. It's part of what's at stake in *Caen Amour*: how do women explore different types of femininity, from sensuality to transgression and derision? But there's no literal voguing in *Caen Amour*. We only use certain postures and codes to recreate a certain image of the hoochie coochie. I like to think that hoochie coochie dancers used strategies similar to that of voguers. As an artist, I'm not trying to rewrite History, but to imagine links between histories. Those women, who were a priori performing an erotic dance, may have also been familiar with folkloric or expressionist dances. I believe they also experimented. Maybe some of those women weren't actually women, maybe some of the performers were men. Maybe the men in the audience weren't actually all men? It's one of the characteristics of voguing: you can no longer say for sure who's a man and who's a woman.

Among your influences, you've named Loïe Fuller and Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of Butoh. How did those great figures from the history of dance inspire you?

Loïe Fuller belongs to that time I talked about earlier, when what dance was wasn't entirely clear yet. Her work stood on the border between dance, fashion, design, entertainment, and eroticism. I love the way she would cover and uncover the body, to transform and exalt it. The question of orientalism was also very important in her work, and it's while thinking about Loïe Fuller that I decided to work once again with clothes created by *Comme des Garçons*. They like to play with the forms of the female body, to deconstruct and reform it. As for Tatsumi Hijikata and Butoh, I also created *Caen Amour* to question my own fascination for Asian culture. I visited Japan and India regularly to question my own position *in situ*. I was already particularly interested in Tatsumi and Butoh because Butoh is an art form influenced by modern dance. Digging deeper, I observed the influence of many other popular practices relatively close to the hoochie coochie. Moreover, Butoh studies different representations of sexuality, of gender, and of the idea of taboo, which echoed my own research, since the same questions are at the basis of all my work for *Caen Amour*.

In what way would you say *Caen Amour* is part of a feminist process and vision?



Apart from a female MC and myself, there are three people on the stage: a woman, Perle Palombe, and two men, Thibault Lac and Ondrej Vidlar. But all three of them play and construct female figures. The men are of course seen as men playing women while Perle is seen as a "real" woman. Yet she's also constructing the female figures she's playing, just like Thibault and Ondrej. This tension is interesting and corresponds to a certain culture of feminism, which is usually identified as third-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism focused on the duality men/women, demanding first and foremost equal rights, equal pay, and the same career opportunities. Third-wave feminism understands that there are several different types of femininity and that beauty and sexuality can be used as levers of power. It focuses on the individual's capacity to define him- or herself, on the individual's agency and autonomy. It claims that one should be entirely free to define one's identity, that there is an infinite spectrum of possible positions on the scale of gender. In the show, the performers explore numerous identities and dance different levels of exoticism and perception of beauty. But Perle, as a woman/native/other, can give birth to other potential identities born of distinct choreographic actions. The languid, the stroller, the undressed, the contemplative...

Why this title, *Caen Amour*?

I like the sound of this title, which resembles "Quand l'amour" ("When love") or "A quand l'amour" ("When will we have love?"). Hoochie coochie shows use representations of love, sensuality, and sexuality to seduce their audience. The word "amour" in the title is also an illustration of this marketing concept. Caen is also the city in which I've spent the most consecutive time these past 6 years: I built an entire mythology for myself around Caen, like I did for Montpellier or Belfort, two other cities where I stayed. Metropolises like Paris and New York have of course been a source of imagination but to me, the French cities where I work also have something of the exotic.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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