

Excerpts from Vanessa Martir essay on
Pepatián's Bronx Artists Now: Showcase & Conversation event
Fri Jan 12, 2018

On Friday, January 12th, I attended the 8th annual Bronx Artists Now: Showcase & Conversation, produced by Pepatián, under the leadership of Jane Gabriels.

To begin the conversation that happened after the showcase of artists, at the Bronx Music Heritage Center, Nancy Biberman, the Founder and President of Emerita of Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO), told the audience of dancers, artists and performance artist professionals the story of when she came to work in the Bronx in the early 1990s. She described the burnt out, cinder-blocked buildings and the rubble that was the Bronx and much of New York City in that era. On one of the buildings was a mural with the words: "Persistence of Memory." Biberman says that to her this unknown artist was saying: "Don't forget us." And those words became the DNA of WHEDCO organization: To study what was there before what was lost; to search out people who lived here back then and remember it; to make sure that no one forgets.

That's exactly what Jane Gabriels has been trying to do these past eight years with this showcase: making sure the professional arts and performance world doesn't forget about the Bronx.

The Bronx Artists Now: Showcase and Conversation is a showcase model initiated in 2011 by Jane Gabriels. Part of the annual APAP (Association of Performing Arts Professionals) Conference at the Hilton in Manhattan, the Pepatián showcase offers an opportunity for art professionals from across the country to see Bronx based artists in their home borough. You would think there'd be something like this in every borough: an exhibition of the borough's dancers and performers, but the answer is no. The Bronx is in the fact the only borough outside of Manhattan that does something like this.

What many don't know about the Bronx is that innovation is what the X is all about. Known as the "condado de la salsa," the Morrisania section of the Bronx is also one of the centers of Doo Wop; a number of NEA jazz masters were born in the Bronx, including Eddie Palmieri and Ray Barretto; and the Bronx is also the birthplace of hip hop. That neglect and abandonment that gave the Bronx a bad name, also gave rise to many arts and artists, which is what the Bronx Artists Now event is about: bringing attention to those various art forms and the artists that have come out of it, young and old.

This year's event started at the Pregones Theater with a phenomenal artist showcase. Kayla Farrish of Decent Structures Arts opened the show with an electric solo

performance titled *Wager*. Through complex modern dance choreography, Farrish tells her story of becoming a woman who demands “a better love: respect.”

Tatiana Desardouin of the Passion Fruit Dance Company followed. Accompanied by dancers Mai Lê Ho and Lauriane Ogay, the dancers performed an excerpt of *Dance within Your Dance*. The dancers showed an incredible control and mastery over their bodies, and at one point used shirts as props. The piece asks: “What is the groove? How do you find it? How much weight does it hold in self-expression?” It was stunning work!

Maleek Washington followed with his piece *Shadows of Heaven: Bronx Blues*, accompanied by performers Chet Gold and Maleek Washington. The piece, which confronts the complexities of incarceration and family, weaved hip hop and ballet with theater and visual art. I was moved nearly to tears by the performance and still remember the words spoken as the dancer performed in center stage: “Hold onto the memories that give you strength. Don’t be mad at the sunset. Son rise. Everyday is a new try.”

Beatrice Capote and Miguel Aparicio of the Sabrosura Effect presented *ORB*, along with percussionist Charles Ferrer. The piece deals with the spirit world and cosmic energy, which the dancers brought to life through an oleo of dance styles including Cuban Rumba and NYC-style salsa. I watched amazed as the drum and clave took over their bodies, and they joyfully surrendered to spirit while the sounds of the goings of the world went on around them: traffic, people talking, horns beeping.

Militeri Tucker Concepción and Caridad De La Luz (also known as La Bruja) followed with their piece *Poor to Rico*. Inspired by the video poem created by La Bruja in response to the crisis unfolding on the island of Puerto Rico, the piece included Tucker doing an interpretive bomba dance while La Bruja performed her piece at center stage. It was touching and inspiring, as well as timely considering that much of the island is still devastated and without power more than 100 days after Hurricane Maria.

Johnnie Cruise Mercer of TheREDprojectNYC shared excerpts from *process memoir: on the action of black and white*, performed by Shanice Mason, Nicolas Rodriguez, Johnnie Cruise Mercer and Akil Williams. The piece began playfully but changed tune quickly into a more serious, probing piece that delves into memory and how it shapes us.

The final act were hip hop dancers It’s Showtime NYC!, who presented their *Festival of Dreams*. While a commentator spoke, the dancers came forth and introduced themselves and their dance styles. One dancer says: “We have so much to show you through dance,” and thus you’re taken into a celebration of the details that define who we are, and ultimately connects us as human beings.

After these stunning performances, the group was taken north through The Bronx to the Bronx Music Heritage Center for a delicious lunch catered by the Cafe Royale Restaurant.

Roots and Branches: Bronx and Beyond followed, where a panel of organization representatives and artists gathered to answer questions moderated by Eva Yaa Asantewaa. The panelist pairings were: dancer Alethea Pace with Juliana F. May, Fresh Tracks Program Adviser of New York Live Arts (NYC); Dancer Fana Fraser with Carla Peterson, Director of MANCC/Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (FL); and Legendary Dancer Rokafella with Judy Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director & Chief Curator of Danspace Project (NYC).

During the panel discussion and the Q&A session that followed, I discovered that these Bronx based dancers, whom were all people of color, were dealing with and confronting issues on access to resources, tokenism and diversity.

Several mentioned that although hip hop music and culture has become a world phenomenon, hip hop dance is still look down at as not being “real dance.” One dancer said when he mentions his influences, he’s been shrugged off and told “we need something more innovative” but he hasn’t seen the same happen to his white counterparts. He said: “Dancers of color are always being required and pushed to create something new, constantly innovate.”

I’ve heard writers of color have these same conversations, along with visual artists, filmmakers, photographers, etc. I am left wondering: How can we support one another? How can we bring our arts together and help one another, build together, etc.?

One dancer said she wasn’t taught how to write an artist statement, and many don’t have resources to learn that. This is what they’re referring to when they speak of access to the professional side of art.

Rokafella stepped in to her insight from her decades in the industry. She said the artists have to start asking themselves: Why does becoming mainstream mean I made it? “I can perform right here in the Bronx, on this stage and I know I made it.”

Rok also sympathized with the frustrations expressed by the young artists because as she said, “that was me twenty years ago.” She pushed: “We have to produce and we have to hustle. You know someone who got a grant, ask them: can I see it? Learn from it.” She admitted that she’s had to work twice as hard as women of color and hip hop dancer, to learn the business side she wasn’t taught. “The learning curve is huge,” she says, but it’s up to individual artists to look for organizations to support them. She listed a number of organizations that have supported her in the past, including Bronx Council of the Arts, Bronx Museum of the Art and WHEDCo.

Rok said artists are rebellious. You have to learn to humble yourself. Listen. Be willing to learn. Always the generous spirits, Rok said: “I’ll give you my shoulders for you to climb on.”

Rok says she now produces for herself and her community because the Bronx is where her heart is at. When I asked her what she wants people to know about being an artist in the Bronx, she wrote: “I’m always representing the best of the Bronx. We keep striving despite being left on our own. I think being an artist in the Bronx means you have to pull up from your roots and believe in yourself 200%. The people I have worked with all these years have a mutual respect and compassion for the harsh situations we face and we trust that hard work pays off. Most of us already witnessed the paths that lead to jail, disease or the cemetery so we are clear about walking and/or carving alternative paths ourselves. It can feel lonely and vulnerable at times but there are times you feel the love and that makes it worth the sacrifices.”

During the Q&A session, the professionals on the panel were asked what they were doing about diversity and tokenism. The consensus was that while some steps have been taken, more has to be done. The hope is that this conversation highlighted the need for more direct action to bring marginalized artists into the forefront, where they belong.

For now, Pepatián is doing its part, under the leadership of Jane Gabriels, to make sure that Bronx artists are showcased and represented, reminding us of the persistence of memory, and that we never forget.

~ ~ ~

I reached out to dancers for any additions they might have wanted to add to this summary of the conversation. Beatrice Capote wrote:

My comment/ question in which was not really answered but I will rephrase here: Why are companies such as La Mora Oyu Oro or other african dance companies and choreographers not seen more often in the concert dance world? Why are artists doing traditional movements and enhancing the culture categorized differently? In my case, as a contemporary and also an Afro-Cuban dancer, why do I have to exist in one world or the other? Why can’t they be integrated? As an Afro-Latina, I would like to see companies that speak to this world of dance, and also those that have space for both contemporary and traditional folklore dances to co-exist. Why don’t presenters venture out to the undergrounds and see what other talents there are?

I thought that the discussion was a great way to listen to artists, such as myself, as an emerging choreographer creating new works from residency opportunities where I can invest in processes of choreography and collaboration. I enjoyed the panel and the commonality of all the artists discussing the same topics. The question that stands in my

brain is what now? Lets continue the path and promote changes. Let us work together as collaborative artists and cultural workers reaching for the same goals.