OKWUI OKPOKWASILI & PETER BORN

Photo by Ian Douglas

ABOUT

OKWUI OKPOKWASILI is a Brooklyn based performer, choreographer and writer creating multidisciplinary performance pieces. The child of immigrants from Nigeria, Okpokwasili was born and raised in the Bronx, and the histories of these places and the girls and women who inhabit them feature prominently in much of her work. Her highly experimental productions include "Bessie" Award winning Pent-Up: A Revenge Dance, "Bessie" Award winning Bronx Gothic, Poor People's TV Room, When I Return Who Will Receive Me, and Adaku's Revolt. Recent works include installations in the exhibitions: "Grief and Grievance, Art and Mourning in America" at the New Museum, "Witchhunt" at The Hammer Museum in LA, and "Sex Ecologies" at Kunsthall Trondheim in Norway. Commissions include the performance On the way, undone at the Highline in New York City and at Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn as part of FIAF's Crossing the Line Festival, the film Returning for Danspace Project, and the site specific performance Swallow the Moon at Jacob's Pillow. She has worked with film and theater directors: Carrie Mae Weems, Ralph Lemon, Arthur Jafa, Terence Nance, Josephine Decker, Mika Rottenberg, Mahyad Tousi, Charlotte Brathwaite, Jim Findlay, Annie Dorsen and Peter Born.

Okpokwasili's residencies and awards include The French American Cultural Exchange (2006-2007); Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography Choreographic Fellowship (2012); Baryshnikov Arts Center Artist-in-Residence (2013); New York Live Arts Studio Series (2013); Under Construction at the Park Avenue Armory (2013); New York Foundation for the Arts' Fellowship in Choreography (2013); Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Extended Life Program (2014-17, 2019-20); ICPP at Wesleyan (2015), The Foundation for Contemporary Arts' artist grant in dance (2014); BRIClab (2015); Columbia University (2015), the Rauschenberg Residency (2015), the Mellon Creative Futures Fellowship at Carolina Performing Arts, UNC-Chapel Hill (2018-2021). Okpokwasili was the 2015-2017 Randjelovic/ Stryker New York Live Arts Resident Commissioned Artist (RCA.) She was a 2018 Princeton University Hodder Fellow, a 2018 Herb Alpert Awardee in Dance, an Antonyo Awardee, a 2018 Doris Duke Artist Awardee, and a 2018 MacArthur Fellow. She was the inaugural artist for the Kravis Studio Residency program at MOMA in 2022.

PETER BORN works as a director, composer and designer of performance and installation, often in collaboration with Okwui Okpokwasili, with whom he has created the installation repose without rest without end in Trondheim (2021), Swallow the Moon at Jacob's Pillow (2021), on the way, undone at the High Line (2021), Poor People's TV Room (SOLO) installation at the New Museum and the Hammer Museum (2021), Sitting on a Man's Head (2019) at Danspace Project, Adaku's Revolt (2019) at Abrons Arts Center, At the Anterior Edge (2018) with the Barnard Dance Department, Poor People's TV Room (2017), when I return, who will receive me (2016), Bronx Gothic (The Oval) (2014), Bronx Gothic (2013) and pent-up: a revenge dance (2009), as well as an album they produced together "day pulls down the sky" (2019). Their work has also appeared in the Berlin Biennale and at the Tate Museum, London. He has collaborated with David Thomson as a director, designer and writer on The Venus Knot (2017) and he his own mythical beast (2018), and as a set designer for Nora Chipaumire's rite/riot (2014) and El Capitan Kinglady (2016). His work Poor People's TV Room (SOLO), created in collaboration with Okwui Okpokwasili, is in the collections of the Hammer Museum and the Whitney Museum. Four of Peter's collaborations have garnered New York Dance Performance "Bessie" Awards. His work as an art director and prop stylist has been featured in video and photo projects with Vogue, Estee Lauder, Barney's Co-op, Bloomingdales, Old Navy, "25" magazine, The Wall Street Journal and No Strings Puppet Productions. He is a former New York public high school teacher, itinerant floral designer, corporate actor-facilitator, video maker and furniture designer.

SELECT PRESS

"A riveting presence in her own unclassifiable creations, Okpokwasili can leave an audience vibrating, moved by images and incantations that linger long after a performance has ended."
Siobhan Burke, *Dance Magazine*

"Okpokwasili endows each gesture and intonation with multivalent resonance. In the flourished extension of a hand, the lowering of the eyes, or the lifting of the chin, Okpokwasili conjures the ways that past events haunt action in the present tense." Catherine Damman, *Cultured*

"No matter what she does, she is riveting." *The New Yorker*

"With a hypnotic voice and limbs that swallow up space, she pushes herself to the edge as a performer, playing with extremes of ecstasy, sadness or rage with almost dangerous intensity."
Siobhan Burke, *New York Times*

"Okpokwasili has always been a standout in New York's crowded performance scene, not least because of what she is able to do with her body: like a latter-day Judith Jamison, she makes whole narratives out of gestures a back bend can intimate her irrepressible desire to take center stage and stay there."
Hilton Als, *The New Yorker*

"To see her in person is to be almost blown backwards, like a sharp wind taking your breath away."
Hyperallergic

"Okpokwasili is a powerhouse artist with a molten presence on stage: steely, ever fluid."
Jennifer Krasinski, *Artforum*

"Okpokwasili is performer of extraordinary grace and power. She has a low, thrilling voice; she dances her shuddering dances like she's been plugged into a power-source that won't let her rest."
Helen Shaw, *Time Out New York*

"For the past decade Okpokwasili has been responsible for, or part of, the most compelling performance work to be seen on this country's stages." Elizabeth immer, *The Village Voice*

POOR PEOPLE'S TV ROOM

"*Poor People's TV Room* is part of the grand narrative about politics, the body, and place that Okpokwasili is building, gesture by gesture, whisper by whisper, brick by brick."
Hilton Als, *The New Yorker*

"I can't think of a piece this year that's been so unabashedly gorgeous. It's a series of astonishments, an abstract work with focused power and not a person in New York should miss it."
Helen Shaw, Time Out New York

"The performance is composed almost like a piece of music, in sections and phrases monologues that erupt, dialogues that echo." Jennifer Krasinski, *Artforum*

"*Poor People's TV Room* is as dense and delicate as a centuries-old tapestry."
Gia Kourlas, *New York Times*

"A gentle, haunting refrain concludes Okwui Okpokwasili's *Poor People's TV Room*. The sweetness of that final plea cuts to the soul. The artist, with her multitude of tools and methods, draws us closer to a forgotten people and removes some of the false comfort of distance and ignorance."
Eva Yaa Asantewaa, *InfiniteBody*

"This astonishing ninety-minute performance, with riveting choreography by Okpokwasili and a live-feed set designed by Born, traverses women's embodiment of memory and resistance, with references to the 1929 Women's War in Nigeria, in which Igbo women asserted their rights against colonial rule; the 2014 Chibok school-girls kidnappings; and Oprah (here an acerbic metonym for aspiration). Undoubtedly the most affecting work I saw in the past Year."
oe Whitley, *Artforum*, Best of 2017 issue

BRONX GOTHIC

"A mesmerizing and sometimes harrowing solo piece." Tim Murphy, *New York Times*

"*Bronx Gothic* is a masterpiece of physicality and endurance in which a single body becomes a vessel channeling memories, histories, suppressions, desires and sorrows."
Rosemary Waugh, *The Stage* (London)

"Okpokwasili is uite simply a virtuoso, an ex uisite singer, speaker, writer, mover, a siren who draws us to danger." Laura Molzahn, *Chicago Tribune*

"The piece can make your hair stand on end.... a Kara Walker image come to life..." *DanceBeat*

"Breathtakingly hypnotic dance-theatre." Rosemary Waugh, *The Stage* (London)

"A tour de force... This is ancient girl energy. This is a feminist griot.... How personal is too personal On stage, in intimate performance is this catharsis, psychotherapy, a council, an exorcism Is not this what is re uested of the artist to go where the others refuse Or is this the work of a minister or a medical doctor. Could all of these personas live within her " Linda Ravenswood, *LA Arts Beat*

"By turns witty, delicate and lacerating... along with great pain, Okpokwasili finds humor and a certain powerful glamour in female strength, even when it's just fronting, and something literally tidal, earthshaking, in longing and anger... in the midst of this great feat of performance, she breaks your heart, absolutely slays you with the poetry of it." Eva Yaa Asantewaa, *InfiniteBody*

PROFILES

Photo by Helen Murray

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T PRESENTS

A Performance Artist Testing the Limits of Her own Endurance.

In deeply personal works such as the acclaimed “Bronx Gothic,” Okwui Okpokwasili explores ideas of cultural memory through poetry and visceral body-wringing choreography.

The performance artist Okwui Okpokwasili, photographed in her dressing room at the Young Vic Theater in London. Credit: Carlotta Cardana

By Antwaun Sargent

August 7, 2019

In the opening scene of Okwui Okpokwasili's experimental one-woman masterpiece "Bronx Gothic" — an intoxicating blend of dance, theater and installation art — the writer, choreographer and performance artist stands, in a purple slip dress, twitching and jerking her nearly six-foot-tall frame. Her gestures fill the air with a strange hurt. She calls the movement "the Quake," and it swells long before the audience enters the theater to find Okpokwasili, 46, already onstage and working herself into a maniac sweat with her back to the room. After almost 15 minutes, she turns to face the audience. For a moment, her body sways with exhaustion, and her dark brown eyes stare vacantly at the expectant faces that fill the black box. Then she moves to a small microphone and says, in an octave that telegraphs the ingenuousness of an 11-year-old black girl: "I want to share something with you."

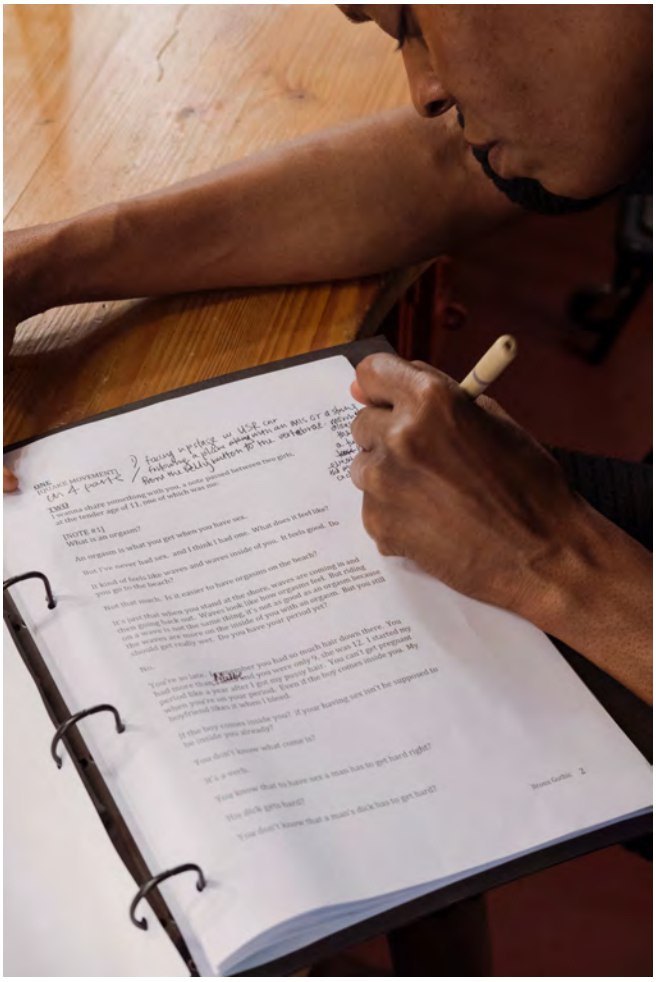
For such visceral performances, Okpokwasili was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the honor informally referred to as the "genius grant," in 2018. It was an acknowledgment of her work pushing performance art past its limits in nonlinear, interdisciplinary narratives that incorporate, to astonishing effect, dialogue, sound, song, installation and movement. In March 2020, the artist will take a turn as guest curator for the Platform performance and exhibition series at Manhattan's Danspace Project. Her own work highlights the interior lives of black women and girls contending with history, exposing the messy terrains of femininity and race without turning representation into clichés about black liberation or struggle.

The artist sits onstage beside a set designed by her husband and creative collaborator, Peter Born.
Credit: Carlotta Cardana

With the 2019 piece "Adaku's Revolt" — the story of a young girl "whose big, unruly hair has magical properties" — Okpokwasili created a meditation on rejecting narrow notions of beauty; "Poor People's TV Room" (2017), meanwhile, considers Nigerian women's resistance

movements, spanning from the Women's War of 1929 to the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls campaign against Boko Haram. In that narrative, a story of intergenerational black sisterhood among four women unfolds on a stage wrapped in plastic scrim. The set is activated by a camera that projects the women's actions as a visual installation on large white screens. Okpokwasili and the other performers sing, slow dance and lie with each other. In one sequence, the artist appears to drink milk from another woman's breast. They possess heritage and love, political and social agency. The identity of victimhood does not count for all that they are, all that they will be.

Okpokwasili, who was born in New York to Nigerian parents, says she has wanted to "make stuff" since she was 7 years old. She started by writing plays, inspired by the TV series she watched. But from that early age, she recalls, "I always felt like, 'Where are the black people?'" So she wrote them herself, creating characters that looked and lived like her community. In 1996, she graduated from Yale University and has since built a breathtaking body of professional work, collaborating over the years with the artist and choreographer Ralph Lemon, with the playwright Young Jean Lee and with the artist Arthur Jafa on Jay-Z's "4:44" music video, wherein she improvises a mesmerizing duet with the Brooklyn flex dancer Storyboard P.



"I start with text," Okpokwasili says, describing the process by which she creates experimental works that combine elements of narrative, movement, sound and installation art. Credit: Carlotta Cardana

The artist photographed during a recent run of “Bronx Gothic” at the Young Vic Theater in London. Credit: Carlotta Cardana

“The narrative of the character is to lose control,” Okpokwasili says of her role in “Bronx Gothic,” which recently completed its run at the Young Vic Theater in London. First performed at Danspace Project in 2014 and later made into a film by Andrew Rossi, the work is a collaboration with her husband and creative partner, Peter Born, who often directs, designs and scores her pieces. She calls it “a bit of a stew” that incorporates her training in theater and grew out of a text she wrote. The core drama centers on “the nature of innocence,” Okpokwasili says, and it explores lust and survival in the story of two young black girls who come of age in 1980s New York, a city where their dreams and bodies go unprotected. “I feel like ‘Bronx Gothic’ was me trying to figure out how to disentangle desire from violence,” Okpokwasili says. The piece examines the ways black girls and young women are perceived and treated and “how much sexual violence is embedded in an inevitable layer of the patriarchy.” It is loosely autobiographical, composed of fragments of her own childhood and the lives of girls she grew up with in the borough.

Like her 2009 Bessie Award-winning performance piece “Pent Up: A Revenge Dance,” a folk tale about the relationship between a Nigerian mother and daughter that loosely explores Okpokwasili’s own experience as a “child of the Bronx and Nigeria,” the 80-minute “Bronx Gothic” is a test of emotional and physical endurance, in which she charts the interior contours

of the diasporic black female experience. Her art is simultaneously tough, direct and courageously vulnerable. It is the body in communication with itself.

In “The Twins,” an in-progress piece that the artist introduced at a benefit for the arts magazine Triple Canopy in 2017, Okpokwasili and the performer Helga Davis, both dressed in white, move against a backdrop that recalls a galaxy of stars. Voice-overs recite excerpts from the work of Hilton Als and Toni Morrison. The performers fall into each other as a metaphor for the ways black women hold each other up. In this pas de deux, Okpokwasili evokes a range of emotion with each contortion of her body: She raps a foot on the floor, the ground shakes, and we, too, recall the strength of our own bodies. “The body has a kind of truth,” says Okpokwasili, and in her performance, she seeks to go inside that space. “Then I feel like I’m free.”

CULTURED MAGAZINE

ART

Combining dance, theater and installation, MacArthur “Genius” Okwui Okpokwasili dips into the past, subtly elucidating its bearing on the present

BY CATHERINE DAMMAN

03.12.2019

Photography by Naima Green

Okpokwasili stretches out on Material Lust’s Twin Peak Sofa for Green’s camera.

Okwui Okpokwasili has been a wicked daughter; a bedraggled, long-limbed ballerina in love with a race car; the proprietor of a remote saloon; and the devil herself. Her riveting stage presence features in productions by many of the country's most innovative theater makers (she played the aforementioned roles in Young Jean Lee's *LEAR*, Richard Foreman's *Maria del Bosco*, Richard Maxwell's *Cowboys and Indians*, and Jim Findlay's *Electric Lucifer*, respectively). In her long-standing work with the choreographer Ralph Lemon, Okpokwasili has experimented at the limits of the form: Together, their working process has included everything from a 12-hour durational experiment in silence to a performance of extended keening.

Dedicated patrons of New York's downtown performance scene know that Okpokwasili's name in a playbill signals a chance to bear witness to the performer as author. Her supreme intelligence is always respectful of the material and yet nonetheless transformative. The recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" grant, Okpokwasili endows each gesture and intonation with multivalent resonance. In the flourished extension of a hand, the lowering of the eyes, or the lifting of the chin, Okpokwasili conjures the ways that past events haunt action in the present tense.

Okwui Okpokwasili snakes her way through the seat of a chair by Josef Hoffman.

Raised in the Bronx, Okpokwasili is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. Her own work often takes her autobiography as a prism, refracting it to summon other narratives—deeply rooted, often gnarled, still a site for new life. With great formal inventiveness, her performances plumb histories of colonization and the African diaspora; the ongoing legacies of violence that structure black life in America; and the creativity and power that has endured, even within varying degrees of terrible unfreedom. This spring, her latest

work, Adaku's Revolt, premieres at Abrons Arts Center. In English, "Adaku" translates to "daughter of wealth," and the performance tells the story of one such girl who resists the standards of beauty imposed on her by others, including the alteration of her hair—its rituals, its searing tools and its loaded semantics. Describing her thinking to me, Okpokwasili speaks in the vocabulary of sense memory: Not only the burn of a hot comb on one's ear, but also the more chronic fear of freshly-straightened hair getting wet, an unceasing, anxious tensing against the rain.

Adolescence, that quivering precipice churning with hormone and urge and defiance, likewise anchors Okpokwasili's 2014 performance, Bronx Gothic, an epistolary novel come to life. She reads from furtive exchanges in an extended monologue, which she enunciates in two distinct vocal registers: One a queasy coo of drawn out syllables and vocal fry, the other an emphatic baritone. The two voices, resounding from one body, articulate the conversation between one young girl, untutored, who asks about breasts and semen and orgasms, and another, more knowing, who boasts her sexual knowledge while grappling with its entwinement in trauma. Yet the craft of the work allows the cordon that distinguishes the two girls to slacken, and for this uncertainty to evoke, generatively, all the ways that desire evades certitude. One scene recounts a dream of being on the beach. A haze of partially remembered scents and temperatures, in the associative logic of the unconscious, swiftly morphs memories of pleasure into those of pain. First the sandy idyll is too hot, the ground scalds; then, the ocean's cool promise of relief betrays, becoming a tidal wave of boiling blood.

The experience of wading into unknowing is, in Bronx Gothic, extended to audiences, who enter a darkened space in which Okpokwasili convulses for a terrifying duration, her back to the audience. For this section of "quake movement," she whips from skull to sacrum, elbows jabbing outward and head bobbing. Sometimes her hands whirl in a sped-up version of the gesticulations that can accompany fervent language; the audience senses urgency, but not necessarily its cause. In a documentary about the work's creation by Andrew Rossi, Okpokwasili shares footage of the performance with her parents. We watch them watching her. Her mother immediately has her own lens of interpretation, connecting the movements she sees her daughter enacting to dances "based in the history of the culture." She then demonstrates her own dancing on the spot, right there in the living room, shedding her crimson suit jacket to better move, to be unencumbered.

For her *Poor People's TV Room* (2017), Okpokwasili shares the stage with a multigenerational cast including Thuli Dumakude, Katrina Reid and Nehemoyia Young. The work takes as one starting point the Nigerian Women's War of 1929, a revolt against British colonizers in Nigeria. Okpokwasili's husband and frequent collaborator, Peter Born, co-wrote and directed the piece; the sets and lighting of his design offer audiences exercises in skewed perspective. The performers are sometimes partially obscured behind a cloudy plastic scrim, or lying supine on a table, a live feed projecting their images upright to create the illusion of a living room. Choreographic strategies bring the women's bodies together, then apart. In some moments, one performer might give her weight over to another; in others, she might act as a shadow, moving almost in unison, but not quite. The ensemble also acts as a chorus, with voices swelling in harmonic refrains of "have I swallowed enough?" and "look at this body, boy." While the work does not recount a straightforward narrative of the historical event, it crafts new possibilities for address out of the etymological resonances of "egwu," which in the Igbo language connects protest to performance—to dance.

Some of this research similarly informed *Sitting on a Man's Head*, which Born and Okpokwasili presented at the 2018 Berlin Biennale. An experiment in "collective utterance," participants engage in conversation with the performance's facilitators, and then share in improvising songs of grievance and joy. One anecdote is perhaps exemplary: Born had a fruitful conversation with a father and young son just outside the installation. The boy was eager to experience the work, but did not want to remove his shoes, as was required. Moments later, Okpokwasili spotted the kid, astride her husband, who was crawling on all fours. Desires were permitted and alternatives were sought out. A body's faculties were put to new use. The child's feet never touched the ground.

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Okwui Okpokwasili

MAKING SPACE FOR STRANGENESS

Why Okwui Okpokwasili Is Just the Kind of Artist We Need in 2019

Siobhan Burke
May 13, 2019

Okwui Okpokwasili seems to gravitate toward tests of endurance.

At the beginning of *Adaku's Revolt*, a recent collaboration with her husband Peter Born, four women (herself included) lie on their backs, spines arched deeply into a shape resembling yoga's fish pose. They remain there, heads inverted and forearms pressed into the ground, for 15 minutes as the audience files in.

At the opening of *Bronx Gothic*, her 2014 one-woman show, Okpokwasili plants herself in a corner and shudders for half an hour, sometimes more—and that's just a prelude to the hour-long performance.

Photo: Jayme Thornton

You could think of these spells of doing one thing, intensively, as portals into her work, between wherever you are and whatever plane she is inhabiting.

"How to open up channels—between me, or the folks who are performing with me, and the folks who are watching?" she says, articulating one of her recurring concerns. "I think time does that for me. If there's time, maybe looking differently can happen."

A riveting presence in her own unclassifiable creations, Okpokwasili can leave an audience vibrating, moved by images and incantations that linger long after a performance has ended. Whether exploring the paradoxes of black American girlhood (as she does in the Bessie Award–winning *Bronx Gothic*), the history of Nigerian women's resistance movements (*Poor People's TV Room*) or the politics of hair (*Adaku's Revolt*), she approaches her material obliquely, as if keeping its secrets hidden even from herself. Though often rooted in specific events and lived experiences, the worlds she imagines, and the people in them, are expansive, enigmatic, their logic not easy to untangle.

"Trying to make a space for strangeness, a space that isn't the virtuosity one might expect in a performing black woman's body, is really critical to me," she says. "I want a liberated space that goes beyond expectations about what my body should be doing—expectations of a particular beauty or power or invulnerability."

While her work straddles categories—dance, theater, poetry, song—the body in motion, or in charged stillness, is always central. And while her own body, nearly six feet tall, does emanate beauty and power, it also carries her to more precarious, ambiguous places: ecstasy, grief, confusion, contemplation and states in between.

"How can someone be so completely fierce, putting all this energy out there, and then in a split second pull it back with such incredible restraint?" says Judy Hussie-Taylor, the executive director of Danspace Project, which co-commissioned *Bronx Gothic* with Performance Space 122. "That never ceases to amaze me in her."

The daughter of Nigerian immigrants, Okpokwasili, 46, grew up around dance as a social activity. Recalling parties at her childhood home in the Bronx, she says: "People would come over, and there would be music and dancing. We would eat and dance. It just would be happening."

Her interest in movement—its theatrical possibilities—deepened in college, at Yale, when she saw a showing of Ralph Lemon's *Geography*. (She would go on to become a pivotal performer in his work.) Later she studied at Min Tanaka's butoh-influenced Body Weather Farm in Japan. Watching dancers like Tanaka and members of Sankai Juku, she observed "a kind of timelessness, where you could be a child, then grow old, then become a child again," she says. She began to think of dance as "a form that can contain the vast experience of being in the human body."

Photo: Jayme Thornton

Her investigations with that form have earned widespread recognition. Last year alone, Okpokwasili, who now lives in Brooklyn with Born and their daughter, received a Doris Duke Award, an Alpert Award, a United States Artists Award and a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. Perhaps most momentously, while on her way to do laundry one day last summer, she answered a call from an unknown number to find out that she was one of 25 MacArthur Fellows (or "genius grant" recipients) for 2018.

"It was an amazing year for me, just in terms of gifts," she says, offering a humble hypothesis that "some kind of weird vortex" had opened up for her. "I was like, 'Wow, I happen to be occupying the right space in the right moment.' "

While the recognition has helped her financially, the impact—especially of the $625,000 MacArthur prize—hasn't completely sunk in, as her life as a

freelance artist continues at its usual speed.
Over the past few months, Okpokwasili has been preparing for a London run of *Bronx Gothic* at the Young Vic theater, June 1–29. Directed by Born, who also designed the lighting and set, the semi-autobiographical work tells a story of two young black women—or two sides of the same woman—coming of age in the Bronx. Plunging into its haunting songs and turbulent movement, Okpokwasili barely comes up for air.

"It's like you get on a train, a fast train, and just *go*," she says. The critic Hilton Als, writing in The New Yorker*The New Yorker*, called the show "a tour de force on the order of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the author's seminal text on black girlhood and power."

In the field of experimental dance and theater, where Okpokwasili tends to reside (though you may have also seen her in Jay-Z's "4:44" video, or on the HBO series "Random Acts of Flyness"), the longevity of *Bronx Gothic* is rare. Its reach has to do, in part, with Andrew Rossi's widely seen documentary of the same name, which follows Okpokwasili as she tours the work, engaging in tough conversations about race and identity along the way.

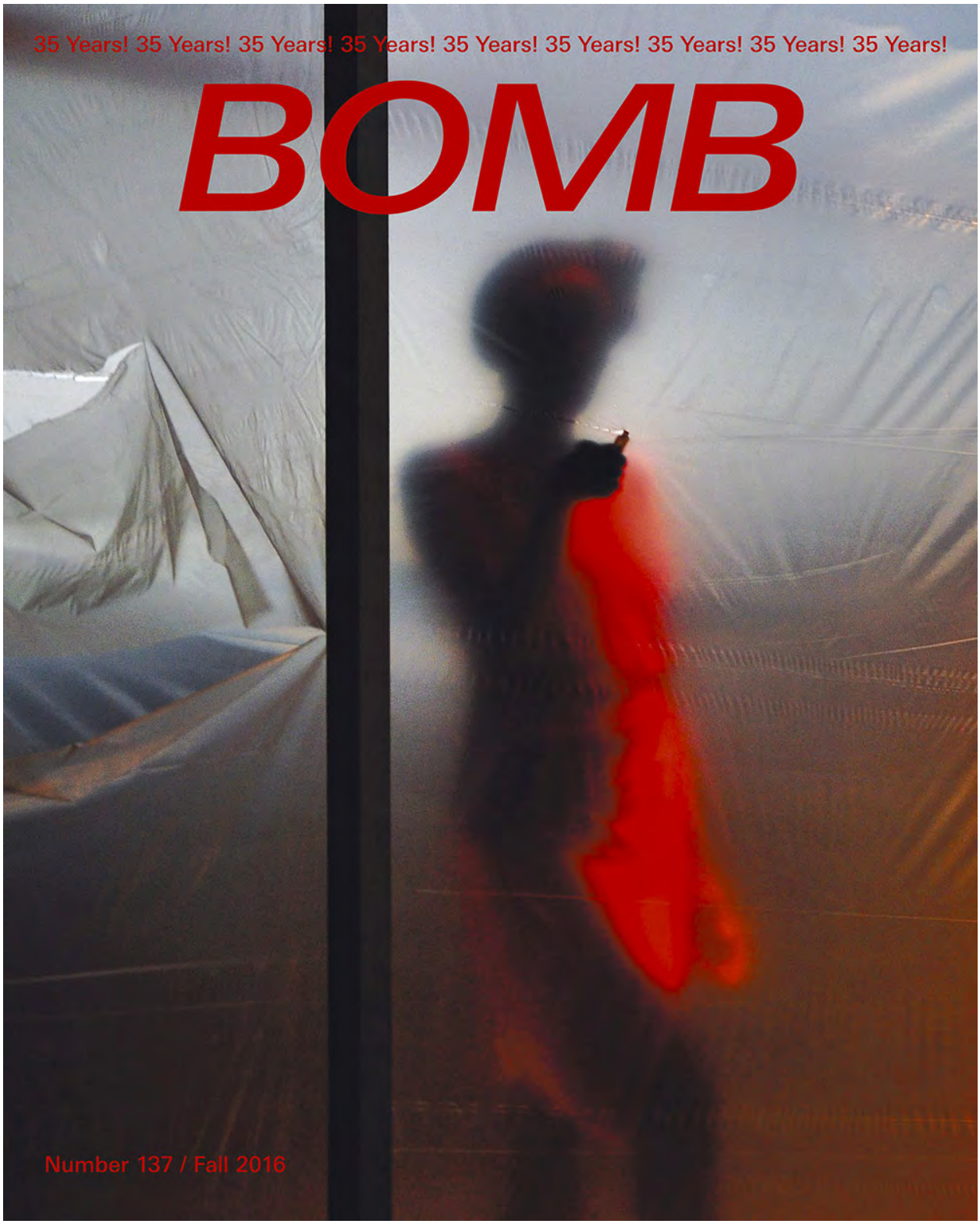
The film also captures the collaborative relationship between Okpokwasili and Born (disagreements included), a partnership that allows disciplines to jostle and blur. Okpokwasili often uses text she has written—precursors to a script or songs—as a starting point for generating movement.

"We don't really do choreography, like 'Do these moves,' " says Born. "Okwui might have a specific gestural phrase, but then she'll be like, 'What does your body want to do with that?'"

Their process is as rigorous as it is open-ended. While doing everything with conviction, Okpokwasili likes to keep herself wondering what exactly she is up to. "I want it to be a mystery," she says. "I don't always want to know."

35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years! 35 Years!

BOMB



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BOMB

Okwui Okpokwasili

by Jenn Joy

Okpokwasili in *Bronx Gothic*, Danspace Project, New York, 2014. Photo by Ian Douglas.

Dancer, writer, and choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili staged her latest work, *when I return who will receive me*, in the underground magazine of Fort Jay on Governor's Island in June 2016. The performance and installation entangles histories of war and resistance with expressions of memory, grief, and desire. Okpokwasili's fierce choreography reflects her minute attention to utterance and gesture as emotional physicality, and to how physicality untethers language. As she performs—shaking, doubling over, collapsing—other dancers play out and repeat intimate duets on partially obscured stages. To witness is always to miss something else and to be reminded of the precarious conditions of address.

when I return who will receive me presents fragments from Okpokwasili's ongoing research for *Poor People's TV Room*. Both works speak to forgotten narratives, specifically the embodied protest practices of Nigerian women during the Women's War in the 1920s, and

are cut with Nollywood cinema drama and speculative fiction. Her discursive practice includes collaborations with artists, directors, and choreographers, among them Ralph Lemon, Nora Chipaumire, Peter Born, and Knut Åsdam.

I first met Okpokwasili in 2013, when she and Lemon came to Rhode Island School of Design's sculpture department as visiting artists. We met again this past summer, upon her return from a tour of her solo work *Bronx Gothic*, to continue our conversation about the conditions and ethics of performance in the context of sexuality and race, and around finding words for sensations and events that resist verbalization.

–Jenn Joy

Jenn Joy In recent years, your collaborative work, and in particular your solo work, has focused on cultural and historical memory, and on sorrow and grief. In *when I return who will receive me*, we find you in an underground room, trembling, dancing...

Okwui Okpokwasili I'm not sure if I would say that my work has focused on sorrow and grief. Perhaps a layer of these emotions is inevitable when you work in performance, its chief problem and strength being impermanence. Maybe it's more about sorrow and memory, the failure of recall to illuminate and sustain any idea of who we are. I was trying to make a space that resonates with not remembering and then attempting a visceral recall. I thought of calling out, crying out, to a past that can't be clearly discerned. I thought of a group of women coming together and listening to each other to express not just grievances but grief and pain. They were desperate, and in calling out to each other, they called out to the world. I wanted to make space to have women come together, find each other, and call out.

JJ There is so much to grieve these days, a deluge of catastrophes. I have been rereading Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* all month. She writes of a "dark crescent of land, a place where suffering is essentially meaningless, where the present collapses into the past without warning, where we cannot escape the fates we fear the most, where heavy rains come and wash bodies up and out of their graves, where grief lasts forever and its force never fades." Nelson conjures a darkness that feels like depression, but also illuminates how writing can navigate fear with attention.

OO My new piece, *Poor People's TV Room*, is about a critical absence that I feel when a tragedy happens—like the kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram and the Women's War in Nigeria. My work is not explicitly about the incredible women in northern Nigeria who came together to shame their government into doing something to get these 300 abducted girls back. African women are not just victims of colonizers and oppressive or corrupt governments. They have been building collectives and advocating and fighting to be visible for a long time. I don't want to make documentary work—but I don't want these women to disappear, either. My piece is about visibility, or collecting—

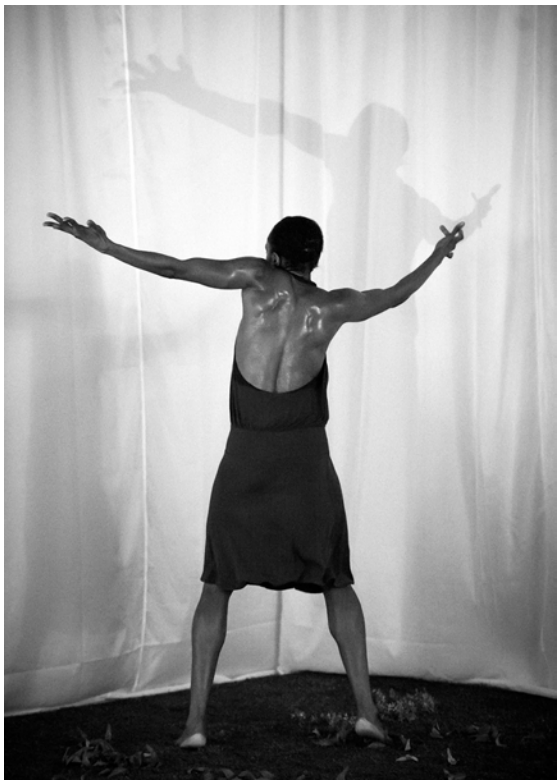
JJ It feels essential that history is not just being represented, that the physicality of performance conjures a point of contact against forgetting, an imagining specific to history.

OO It's material. So how do we imagine? What is the nature of that imagining? I claim an Igbo identity in Nigeria. Yet, when I am there, I am clearly a very distant relation, if not a tourist. My family is Igbo; they came to the US and stayed because the Biafran War

devastated their homeland. So my being raised in the United States is directly tied to the legacy of the Igbo people. But I didn't grow up there. I don't live in Nigeria. I don't even speak Igbo. I can say "shut up" and "If I hit you, you will cry now." I feel like I'm looking at so much from the outside, yet it's also inside me. I'm wrestling with that. That's why I had to create a fiction.

How do I guard against erasing the marks of my Western position, my inflection, or infection? How do I attempt to possess these practices of the Other—even if I commingle my multiple, buried selves, insofar as these women are related to me, or are ostensibly my ancestors? Traditional Igbo cosmology is deeply concerned with sustaining the tie between the living and the dead. You give libations to the ancestors; they are dependent on you to feed them, to quench their thirst. They die again when they're forgotten. So perhaps they are okay with my attempts at possession.

JJ Your work infuses gesture with the somatic. It happens on a cellular level. *Bronx Gothic*also imagines a possession of another kind, one that feels more intimate, even autobiographical, as the main text takes the form of an epistle: you read a series of letters between two young girls. For the audience, it's tempting to assume that one of them might be you. But it is fiction—representation at its slippery limits.



Okpokwasili in *Bronx Gothic*, Danspace Project, New York, 2014. Photo by Ian Douglas.

OO With *Bronx Gothic*, there is no authority even in my own history. I can't trust the writing even though I wrote it. I constructed this weird and complicated story around a poor girl who needs to remember the awful things that happened to her. She has to collect them, put them all together, and share them so that someone will remember. But only the body remembers.

That's how you can try to get to some of these things: through the body. I do believe these memories are material in the body.

JJ When you visited my Trespass Performance seminar at RISD, you shared the Amos Tutuola story about a boy who walks into the bush. He encounters ghosts who take him and place him in a bag full of snakes and bugs. The shifting scale is spectacular, as the bag is huge, and yet it can be carried. This story is neither magic realism nor memory, but is rather a collection of material, of trauma and fear with all their leaking odors. You asked the class to translate these images into gestures, forcing language to disintegrate but maintaining something of the images' affective densities.

OO How can you be so *you* that you disintegrate? How can the density create an electric dispersal? Perhaps the beginning of *Bronx Gothic* is about trying to create a density that can break the audience's will to make meaning outside of their own bodies; about attempting to position audience members squarely in the center of their own corporeal density, their own insides. It's about the insides of a girl, a particular girl, me—but it's the *memory* of me. I'm looking back, shaping—*I* is not enough. There were other people. It's their narratives that I need to explore.

JJ You described *Bronx Gothic* as your *Jane Eyre*—writing as self-possession or coming into sexuality and friendship.

OO *Bronx Gothic* is about being unbound. That restrained language in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is something I reject, yet I am also compelled by it. I want to undo manners. What I love about Jane is that she is so deeply loving even as she's perceived by her supposed benefactors as a rude, awful child. And it becomes clear that those who brutalized her were in fact brutal, or greedy, or desperate themselves and in her sense of fairness they detected a rebuke that they would not tolerate. She's full of justice, and her longing to be loved and to be in communion with someone—anyone just and simple and plain and good—kind of broke my heart when I was younger.

JJ There is much violence and desire in both the novel's content and form. In the opening sequence, as Jane is reading about colonial histories, another character takes her book and throws it at her. It emphasizes the urgency of coming to knowledge and the danger of it.

OO I'm concerned with violence. I'm concerned with desire. I'm concerned with my little girl and what she's going to do when she starts looking at her vulva. What is my daughter going to do with her desire? How is she going to understand it? How is she going to satisfy it? I don't know. I remember what I was doing at a young age. I remember what my friends were doing. Is there a place in performance to deal with a brown girl's body as the site of innocence and desire? How can we all go inside the body, inside the psyche? How can I get people in the room to go there, even if I'm not asking them to move? I always talk about the psychic space as an embodied space, a body space. Maybe it's empathy.

JJ I was thinking about empathy as a part of the dramaturgy or the spaciousness that *Bronx Gothic* creates. You are already on stage as the audience walks in, and you shake and keep shaking. Your shadow, too, vibrates, and between you and the shadow lives an interstitial space that doesn't flatten out or become pictorial. You create shifts in distance and intimacy, and then you read us a long letter from a yellow pad. In your reading, we are also read.

OO While I'm the performer, I want you to remember your body, too. It's important to look at people. For other works, there will be other strategies, but for *Bronx Gothic* I felt the need to acknowledge that I'm not the only person in the room. You, the audience, are not invisible or just sitting there, looking at me. I'm looking at you, too. I want the gaze to move in both directions.

In *Bronx Gothic* I didn't want to perform a particular virtuosity that makes people sit outside of it and go, "Ooh, look at how those black people sure can dance." What's the space of being together in a room? How can we tap into that charge and undermine the normal models of how we're together in a room?

Someone asked me after a show, "How do you feel about doing this piece in front of largely white audiences? People get to see this brown or black body in pain, but you never transcend that pain. Aren't you playing into or reifying this position? Are they getting off on it?

Omagbitse Omagbemi in *when I return who will receive me,* 2016, performance at Fort Jay, Governor's Island, River to River Festival. Photos by Peter Born.

JJ This is so complicated. I was speaking with Ligia Lewis about this question—whether performance can only reify subjectivities or if it can ever do other work. *Bronx Gothic* forces a more complicit questioning of subjectivity.

OO The spectacle of brown and black bodies in pain is a deep tradition in this country. I'm not interested in transcending it; I'm living in it. How can we transcend something that is ongoing? *Bronx Gothic* is not about progressing from confusion to clarity, or from pain to no pain—as if I can act as some kind of anesthetic. My character's ability to eventually see and meet herself in that pain—to me it's like, Fuck, finally! As brown women, we are able to see ourselves through all of the constructions of who we aren't.

JJ When you repeat, "Am I awake? Am I awake?" the character multiplies through the question. There is no resolution, but a visceral awakening that simultaneously holds many textures, emotions, and sensations.

OO Maybe I should have been courageous enough to say, "Why should we run away from pain?" There was an article in the *New York Times* about the medical establishment's inherent racism: because doctors don't think black people have the capacity to experience the pain that white people do, they tend not to prescribe opioids at the same rate and levels that they prescribe them to white people. In this country, brown people have occupied a place between beast and human. As Hortense Spillers says about the difference between flesh and body— we are flesh but not necessarily body.

JJ Spillers's analysis is brilliant—describing race as undoing the body as the subject, whereupon it becomes either captive or liberated through "pornotroping" methods. As you said earlier, you are redirecting the gaze to make room for other ways of seeing.

OO My pieces always contain something that I'm hoping for—a transmission of this open pathway of our mutual embodiment. How to keep that pathway open, how to stoke it? How can we get into the viscera? Whose body gets primacy? Whose body gets to be seen? And how do we look at the body, its shape and frame in performance? How are certain bodies lifted above others? Magic or virtuosity in performance are fine, but not at the expense of the brown body's experience in the room. How are we all embodied together in a space? What are we doing to each other as we share a space in time, in a particular time? These are my primary concerns. When I first saw Min Tanaka at PS122, I felt like my body changed watching him. I'm not going to do what he did—but I am interested in the potential for a body transformation among those of us in the room.

JJ Tanaka is such a powerful conjurer of history and geography. His intense physicality and excruciatingly slow movements transmit dark and difficult images—trauma. What was your experience touring *Bronx Gothic* and then bringing it back to the Bronx?

OO Man, that was weird. One thing I feel about doing performance is that my body gets rooted deeper and deeper in the piece. Just when I think there's nothing left in me or nowhere to go with the work, it keeps opening up. Duration definitely has an impact.

The Bronx building in which I performed *Bronx Gothic* was right next to the graveyard and church I used to attend. A receptionist from the church brought a picture on the last night of the show. She thought it showed her brother and me in confirmation class, but the picture was so blurry that I couldn't tell. Still, that feeling of being out of place was coming back to me. I remembered the silence—or having to be silent.

JJ The proximity to the church must have been powerful. The silence and silencing around sex and sexuality that you describe reside so deep in the church and our culture in general. I was just reading the anonymous woman's public letter to Brock Turner, the Stanford University swimmer who assaulted her.

Omagbitse Omagbemi in *when I return who will receive me,* 2016, performance at Fort Jay, Governor's Island, River to River Festival.

OO I was weeping at the end of that motherfucking thing. She made him witness her embodiment. She was silent for so long and, finally, she speaks.

JJ She is clear: This isn't about inebriation; it's about consent. This isn't about promiscuity; it's about rape. Let's not confuse them!

OO She said, "It's like if you were to read an article where a car was hit, and found dented, in a ditch. But maybe the car enjoyed being hit. Maybe the other car didn't mean to hit it, just bump it up a little bit. Cars get in accidents all the time." She makes it clear that in our culture, we have more respect for a wrecked, inanimate object than we do for a woman sexually brutalized. It's as if our culture somehow needs to protect this expression of rage and violence, needs to hold onto it and cultivate it. "We should not create a culture that suggests we learn that rape is wrong through trial and error." She said that beautifully, but, of course, it made me realize that that is precisely what this culture teaches our boys. If rape is really an expression of power, or a particular way of wielding it, cultivating it as one of the tools in the proverbial woodshed of national defense makes sense. It's said that violence should be used as a last, extraordinary recourse, but is that true in practice? How can we undo the impulse toward violence, especially when we believe it might serve us, allow us to get what we want faster? Rape has always been a tool of war, a weapon, a way to undermine and destroy a culture. Will women's bodies continue to be the first site of practice? What can we do to undo this?

JJ As a mother of a young boy, I think often about how to counter this deeply embedded fascination with violence in speech and action.

OO What Brock Turner's assault victim did was a "performance" in line with some of what I'm looking at in my research on the southeastern Nigerian women for *Poor People's TV Room*. It's a work that's still in progress. My concern is with particular bodies that are invisible. We are specters. We are shadows. How to exist as both shadow and living body—which is also a position! It's a place that you're emerging from. The dark shadow is a rich and dangerous space. Who gets to define its outlines and meaning? It's not alive; it has an unshakable weight. It presides over our nightmares.

JJ The shadow is immaterial and exquisitely material at the same time.

OO I don't want to leave the nightmare zone. I want to build full and rich characters with integrity as brown bodies, but I never want to lose the context of what they're working out of. The shadow and the fears have to be there. That is really important. Peter [Born], who does the staging for me, is amazing in terms of designing the architecture in which to situate these characters.

JJ In early iterations of *Bronx Gothic* at the Park Avenue Armory and then at Danspace Project, Peter created a stage as a membrane or skin within the theater. The shadows are cast onto an almost permeable architecture of sheets.

OO I like thinking of it as a skin. Sometimes I think of it as a bedroom, a secret chamber the audience enters. The sheets are marked with all our effluvia and secrets are told. It's a zone where strange things happen, the zone right before dreaming.

JJ Peter's installation design for *when I return who will receive me* beautifully extended the architecture of *Bronx Gothic* into the dank military cavern of Fort Jay.

OO This piece is my attempt at making a shrine in the magazine under Fort Jay on Governor's Island. A shrine to what? The destruction of a particular shrine in southeastern Nigeria in 1902 was a signal to some indigenous people that the British had won. It was the

beginning of the British attempt at unifying the southern and northern parts of the country. The north was mostly a Muslim patriarchal structure that the British could recognize and understand how to manipulate. But in the south they couldn't read the social systems. They considered the south more undisciplined, almost feminine, and much more dispersed and local. Discipline and violence were perpetrated to control the south. Villages were burned down; there was mass conscription—what they called corvèe labor—to build the colonial infrastructure. The destruction of the shrine marks the beginning of the end of the two distinct social systems.

JJ There are only female performers in *when I return*. You sing together.

OO There are seven of us, all brown women. We are coupled or alone throughout the space, speaking, singing, dancing. I wanted to create a sacred intimacy, a space where we could be considered together and apart. That space held our volume. I'm always looking to resonate.

JJ The echoes are very powerful in this piece. The words refrain and carry us into the shadows where they linger in the air. One performer walks into the tunnel singing, "Have I swallowed enough, have I swallowed too much, have I swallowed enough, have I swallowed too much?" while another woman speaks on a small platform at the entrance, parsing questions of visibility and legality like, Who is counting, who is being counted, who is speaking, who is a mouth piece, who is just a piece?

OO Some of what I'm reading around the Women's War looks at the British officers who were colonizing on the ground. They were especially afraid of the bodies of brown and black women, whom the officers considered Amazons, beasts, especially in collectives, and whose nudity only further reinforced their malicious intent. A woman baring her body is an affront to morality, stability, and peace. When African women, especially older women, showed their bodies to shame the people watching—it was a terrifying act.

These women seemed free to me; their embodied protest practices were liberating acts, and not just in service of their own liberation. Their war was also referred to as the *Grand Egwu*. In the Igbo language, *egwu* means dance, so it seems that this protest practice is linguistically tied to performance.

JJ In your piece, the choreographic relationships between the women performers—how they embrace, how they grieve, how they hold each other—suggest their coming into possession of sexuality while also referring to the violence that surrounds them.

OO One act of embodied protest was "sitting on a man's head." The women would collectively go into the home area of a particular person in power and sit on the men's heads. They would sing and dance. They would insult the men, or show them their naked bodies. Apparently, it could get quite scatological. To British or missionary ears, these songs contained highly salacious lyrics that called into question a particular man's sexual prowess.

There were known places of female control, like the marketplace where the women worked and formed organizations.

JJ Collective resistance was already part of the economy?

OO Right. In 1925 there was an event called the Nwaobiala that was the first hint of women's active resistance against the British colonists and missionaries, and against the effects of colonization. Traditionally in some of these southeastern villages—particularly in Igbo culture—the younger women were naked and the older women policed the younger women's bodies; they watched them. If you were pregnant, it would show. But then the young women started to clothe themselves. To be clothed was, in a way, to be hidden, to be amoral. One of the demands they made in 1925 was that young women should go undressed and let their private parts be in the sun, see the light.

Thuli Dumakude in *when I return who will receive me,* 2016, performance at Fort Jay, Governor's Island, River to River Festival.

JJ How does this research translate into your work?

OO I find that these collective acts—sitting on a man, building a song and dance—are not only protest practices but also performance practices. They are performances in and of themselves. I want to think about them and create a new and resonant form of embodied practice. The research I did in Times Square in the fall of 2015 was an attempt to gather prompts from strangers about what they always wanted to share with the world. I have over 150 interviews and songs so far. Can I assume that we all have a collective grievance or a problem that we want to communicate? We don't seem to know whom we are addressing. The woman who was assaulted by Turner had someone to address in court. The Nigerian women were addressing a colonial government and the indigenous leaders empowered by this government to set rules that the women felt undermined their traditional practices, the land, and their world. I want to access the collective space.

JJ You're asking performance to behave as an ethical practice. Unlike in court, embodied performance asks not only how we tell stories but what work these stories do when they come together. What image of the present is incited when disparate stories become contiguous? Judith Butler speaks of the bodily demand for more livable lives, of moving from the act of speech to public assemblies. She asks, "What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away?"

OO As stewards of the culture, older Igbo women recognized that the breakdown of the cultural body was an existential crisis. The women believed that the British brought disease and famine. They saw that the "body" they were responsible to protect was in a sense already infected. The British were an abomination. The earth was not only rejecting the colonizers, it was reacting against the indigenous people. The women needed to do something to appease the earth. That meant going back to some of their traditional practices. The estimates are that hundreds of women were killed during this time. Masses of naked brown women went to the district offices. The British reacted. They fired into the crowd. The women asked, "Why would you shoot into us? We're trees that bear fruit."

I keep reading these stories, knowing that they will signal something in my body.

JJ Reading as a way back into the body. Writing as a way of awaking to the materiality of your experience.

OO Sometimes I have to run away from the body and then go back to writing. I was told the story of when Nelson Mandela came out of jail and said that he had to relearn how to love his wife. It amazed me that someone who was about to be president would reveal such vulnerability, that after fighting for so long, he didn't know his wife.

JJ His love was so foundational to the transfer of power, to the disposal of tyranny.

OO This idea that you embody a fight, a conflict, and now you're finally the victor—so what is your task as the victor?

After 9/11, I asked two of my female friends—one is a lawyer, the other works for the state—if there is a department where people are considering peace? Why can't we spend our energy and resources on seriously investigating what it would mean to sustain nonviolence—a world without war?

JJ Isn't that what your performance does, just with fewer resources? (*laughter*)

OO Ultimately it's about love, empathy, being in communion, being in community in a way that doesn't need too much. It's not about giving an answer or having a prescription. How can we be in community without demanding things that we can't give?

JJ To be listened to and to be looked at feels so rare, precious.

OO Yes, people want to be seen and heard. It's fundamental. Can I hold the image of a thousand middle-aged-to-elderly brown women stripped naked and singing? Imagine Trayvon Martin's mom, Sandra Bland's mom, Tamir Rice's mom, Eric Garner's mom, Michael Brown's mom, the thousands of moms in Chicago marching naked against state violence, gun violence? Singing, "Are your dicks so small that your guns have to be so big? Come and fill me with your bullets, impotent dicks. Fuck me with your big guns, since you can't get your dicks up?" Imagine for a moment this mass of naked brown women slaying with wit and shoving their pussies in the face of any instrument or symbol of corporate or state violence? My mind can't contain it.

Jenn Joy cofounded collective address, a choreographic research space in Brooklyn, and is the author of The Choreographic *(MIT Press, 2014). She is a BOMB contributing editor.*

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SITTING ON A MAN'S HEADD

Photo by Peter Born

SLEEK

Art & Photography

These Political Installations are the Best of the Berlin Biennale

With the Berlin Biennale underway, we examine five politically-charged works challenging perceptions and bringing us back down to earth.

June 13, 2018

Okwui Okpokwasili at KW Institute for Contemporary Art

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Sitting on a Man's Head*, 2018

Igbo-Nigerian American artist, choreographer, writer and performer Okwui Okpokwasili has created one of the Biennale's most powerful participatory works, made in collaboration with her partner Peter Born and a number of Berlin-based artists. Titled *Sitting on a Man's Head*, the piece draws inspiration from traditional protest tactics employed by women in eastern Nigeria, metaphorically referred to as "sitting on a man's head". This peaceful but powerful strategy involves a collective disruption of seats of power in ways that enable marginalised women to "speak back, air grievances, and effect change". Visitors are invited by presumed participants in the performance (or else very friendly strangers) to enter a designated waiting area, filled with semi-circular benches, and engage in a candid one-on-one discussion. You then enter a calm white tented space, guided by your designated leader. Inside an evocative score unfolds, activated by the tent's new entrants. The result is a distinctly profound and unique experience that is hard to put into words. What's certain is that Okpokwasili's overall aim — that those involved "come together, find each other, and call out" — is undoubtedly achieved.

The Berlin Biennale runs until September 9, 2018.

Images courtesy of Berlin Biennale. Photography by Timo Ohler.

Frieze

Okwui Okpokwasili and What It Means to Sit on a Man

The New York-based choreographer's intensely physical performances are a protest against forgetting the stories that go untold.

By Andrew Hibbard
03 Jun 2019

In late 1929, Igbo women in British-occupied Nigeria waged what has become known as the Women's War. Threatened with the taxation of their market activities and denied representation in the colonial government system, these women partook in a practice known 'as sitting on a man'. This form of public shaming involves performing dances and songs that dramatize grievances against a specific figure, inhibiting him from conducting his daily affairs. The Women's War was fomented by the colonial government's misunderstanding of women's power in Igbo society, resulting in what the British government called a riot. But at the heart of the problem was the colonial imposition of Victorian gender ideas, which pushed a form of patriarchy onto a social system that had a more complicated relation to the entanglements of gender and power.

The Women's War and the practice of sitting on a man have been an enduring research interest for the New York-based artist, choreographer and performer Okwui Okpokwasili for roughly five years. Okpokwasili has collaborated with artists including Nick Cave and Ralph Lemon but, over the past decade, has been increasingly leading her own adventurous, collaborative projects, often with the close participation of her partner Peter Born. Her intensely physical performance work explores structures of feeling and the ghosts of history, particularly as they relate to women of colour.

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Bronx Gothic*, 2014. Photograph: Ian Douglas

In 2015, Okpokwasili began a two-year residency at New York Live Arts in which she began developing a project based on erasure and resistance, spurred in part by the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram and the subsequent Bring Back Our Girls movement. Okpokwasili took interest in the protest as a female-led movement that demanded visibility for those made invisible. These connections to Nigeria are a crucial strand of Okpokwasili's practice and life as the daughter of parents who immigrated to the Bronx from Nigeria during the Biafran War in the late 1960s. And it is this deep interest in histories and experiences that have undergone some form erasure that inspired Okpokwasili to begin drawing connections between the Bring Back Our Girls movement and the Women's War.

The resulting performance, *Poor People's TV Room* – which takes its title from Okey Ndibe's 2014 novel *Foreign Gods*, Inc. about a Nigerian-American taxi driver returning to his home village – was made in collaboration with four other women. Accounts of the performance tend to cite its use of plastic sheeting for stage scenery, its references to Oprah as an idol, the Women's War, and a general thread of feminism. This patchwork of Okpokwasili's research references is inexact insofar as her work tends to evade any kind of about-ness, instead focusing on the affects and experiences that develop from live performance. The impact of her performances is in the tenor and emanation of utterances, the experience of being present with her body and its vibrations, generating an experience irreducible to language. Yet the depth of research in Okpokwasili's work does not vanish under these proto- or extra-linguistic measures. Instead, she is interested in activating themes deep inside us: the ways in which Western ideologies deny histories, experiences and social systems, particularly for women of colour, which challenge Euro-American dogmas. Hers is a version of performance that corresponds to the definition given by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2007): it 'makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life'.

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Bronx Gothic*, 2014. Photograph: Ian Douglas

The intensity of Okpokwasili's embodied performance is perhaps most apparent in her widely celebrated solo work *Bronx Gothic*, which premiered in 2013 and opens at London's Young Vic Theatre tonight. In it, Okpokwasili inhabits the role of two adolescent girls. Performing what she calls a 'break body,' Okpokwasili quakes and tremors, presenting an image of intense bodily stress and also of incredible control and

strength. Her movements call on experiences and spectres of experience – black, gendered – that cannot be contained in any official history or system, and that lie outside of what can be communicated through language. For Okpokwasili, this interest is very much true to her life. She cites the strength and power of the women that she grew up with in the Bronx as a key parallel to the practice of sitting on a man: where, despite patriarchal structures, mothers and grandmothers had an intense ability to marshal shame and assert their authority. In this sense, her insistence on embodiment is not so much about pure visibility, but a deeper material memory, activating a complicity and connectedness with her audience that reaches beyond consciousness or optical recognition.

Her work *Sitting on a Man's Head* premiered at the 2018 Berlin Biennale and was recently restaged at Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas. Once again taking inspiration from Igbo practice, the piece conjures a space in which people come together to explore gestures and languages of lamentation and complaint. The practice of sitting on a man in large part relied on the visibility of bodies in spaces where women had social power. Its political force, in the colonial context, came from its affront to Victorian mores, yet this is also what fuelled it as a practice of ethnographic intrigue. In her film on the same subject, London-based filmmaker Onyeka Igwe similarly explores group lament. Her film *Sitting on a Man* (2018) juxtaposes archival footage of the practice with contemporary interpretations by dancers Emmanuella Idris and Amarnah Amuludun that challenge the ethnographic gaze of the found footage. What her film captures is not only a different vantage on this material but also the impact of its sounds and intensity, how a collective experience can also be a system for individuals to channel their own laments and complaints using a skilled language outside of rhetoric.

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Bronx Gothic*, 2014. Photograph: Ian Douglas

In Okpokwasili's *Sitting on a Man's Head*, participants move through a flimsy architecture of wood and plastic, initiating them into a constructed social space. In the first iteration, at KW, visitors were confronted with questions (e.g., 'What is something you've been afraid to say and why?' 'What do you carry with you?'): an antechamber for reflection that asks them to slow down and adjust to the space they are about to enter. Visitors would then transition to a plastic-wrapped hardwood floor space – evocative of *Poor*

People's TV Room – where a chorus of vocalized melodies plays through speakers. During the opening at KW and Project Row Houses, the space was activated by a group of collaborators, invited by Born and Okpokwasili, who engaged in a set of repeated gestures that act as a mode of communing. Okpokwasili thinks of the psychic and emotional space conjured in *Sitting on a Man's Head* as one in which we might develop a language of protest or work toward articulating a complaint. It dramatizes the ways in which people come together and the spaces that allow them to do so.

Okpokwasili's work offers a repertoire of experiences and possibilities as a means of empowerment. Yet they do not court resolutions or answers but, rather, suggest ways of perceiving the forces that animate our social lives and the possibilities for seeing and sensing otherwise.

Bronx Gothic runs at the Young Vic, London, UK from 1–29 June 2019.

ADAKU'S REVOLT

Photo by Ian Douglas

The New York Times
March 15, 2019

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY PETER BORN

FOR CHILDREN

The Roots of Rebellion

TILT KIDS FESTIVAL AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS (Closing on March 31) If this event, which this year focuses on tolerance, hasn't already given your children new angles from which to view the world, they still have time to dive in. Witness "Adaku's Revolt," at the Abrons Arts Center, which plays on Fridays at 6:30 p.m., Saturdays at 3 and 6:30 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m., through March 24. Commissioned from the MacArthur fellow Okwui Okpokwasili, who also stars in it, this drama chronicles a black girl's rebellion against Western concepts of beauty. Adaku, whose name means "one who brings wealth to the family" in the Igbo language, views her unstraightened hair as a form of cultural richness. (Above, a photo illustration by Peter Born, who designed and directed the show.) The Tilt agenda also includes more theater (March 23-31) and a free program that reflects the festival's French origins: Philosophy for Kids (March 24). *LAUREL GRAEBER*
tiltkidsfestival.org

PERFORMA MAGAZINE

PERFORMA REPORTS

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born

Okwui Okpokwasili, Audrey Hailes, Khadidiatou Bangoura. Photo: Ian Douglas

Adaku's Revolt

Abrons Art Center
March 17, 2019

Much can be said about the political nature of hair—its color, style, length, whether it is worn covered or uncovered, or the race of the person on which it grows. Adaku's Revolt, conceived by choreographer, performer, and MacArthur Fellow Okwui Okpokwasili and directed by Peter Born, details the story of a young black girl in the throes of having her hair straightened. The flipped format of the stage, which placed the audience in a U-formation on it facing the theater's seating, featured a hanging, slow-blinking tangle of

poseable desk lamps that resembled an abstracted head of hair. At first, a large, translucent plastic sheet fluttered elegantly over four performers including Okpokwasili. Prone like fish on the bottom of the sea, they reclined in various positions to the soundtrack of drumming. Adaku, played by AJ Wilmore, sat behind on a stool, the agony of impending hair straightening doom made visible in her upper body movements. The performers then rose, all donning wigs save for Adaku, and contributed to a sonic and visual miasma of voices in support of straightened hair, with Aunty/Mother (Okpokwasili) prompting: “Can a hot comb kill you?”

AJ Wilmore and Okwui Okpokwasili Photo: Ian Douglas

As the stage lights turned off, attention focused on Adaku actively resisting an aunty wielding a glowing, hot comb made sinister in the dark, menacing with its preternatural heat and the ability to create foreseeable pain. Frustration and wrestling manifested through vocalizations, ranging from song, spoken word, and prose, which were matched with controlled movement, and at times, percussive feet. Here, natural hair triumphs against conventional beauty standards, and is read as strength and opposition in a time when the black, female body is the site for a politics of radical resistance.

— Charlene K. Lau

InfiniteBody

art and creative consciousness by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Saturday, March 16, 2019

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born's "Adaku's Revolt"
Abrons Arts Center
March 14-24

One young black girl becomes alert to her inner signals, finds the strength to resist expectations, and revolts against efforts to straighten her hair. -- from Abrons Arts Center's website

Out of the blue, a thought visited me over breakfast today:

No, you can't touch my hair. My hair is part of my body. I do not give you permission to touch my body. So, why do you think you can touch my hair?

I'd swear I don't know where that came from, but I do know it's something I should have said, years ago, to one man--the husband of a fellow dance critic--whose white hand shot out and touched my woolly head. Happened so fast, I didn't have time to cringe, flinch or launch a preemptive strike, which I now sowish I had done.

And I also know Okwui Okpokwasili (with director/designer Peter Born) must have triggered something with a new ensemble work, Adaku's Revolt, just opened at Abrons Arts Center. It's not about white people touching Black people's hair, the site of both painful and glorious historical experience and culture. But it is about how white aesthetics touch Black people's hair...and bodies...and values...and lives.

Dear Okwui, as you must imagine, I know all about the perils of getting the "kitchen" straightened with a hot comb. I think you must have reached out and touched a nerve.

Urban Bush Women's dancers are also looking at the Black hair thing this season with Hair & Other Stories. But Okpokwasili's concept and Born's visual design appear to have the potential to help Adaku's Revolt work down into the subconscious in a way that UBW's far more direct piece--with audience participation that keeps our conscious minds centered and on high alert--might not.

The audience is directed to its place on the stage of Abrons's theater through a back channel and instructed to take seats lining three sides of the performance space. As we enter and get settled, the scene has already been set, a compelling visual atmosphere already built. Before a white screen, four dancers lie on the floor with torsos stiffly arched and heads thrown back. Above them, a large windsock of pearly-white gossamer continuously flows out from a big fan, its hypnotizing, watery fabric reaching for another dancer, our Adaku (AJ Wilmore), who writhes, wriggles, tilts, chops and revs up as she sits in a chair. A dense assemblage of what appear to be ordinary desk lamps lights the area.

Above: Dancer AJ Wilmore as Adaku
Below: Wilmore with Okwui Okpokwasili
(photos: Ian Douglas)

Within Born's vision, Okpokwasili's placement and movement of individual and group bodies take the shape of dreams with nonlinear but soul-tugging storytelling. White fabric engulfing and molding itself

across faces. Bodies emerging from beneath pulsating fabric. Hips and feet twisting, pelvises rocking and left hands raised high in the air over a captivating--and destabilizing--polyrhythm of music and women's voice-overs and live singing.

I tried to jot down something Wilmore said before her turbulent yet mutually-supportive duet with Okpokwasili, and I think I got it right:

I'm going to open all the doors in my head.

Doors opening bring music and voices--both louder, brighter, undeniable--and the birth-like reclamation of bodies. I think the piece, just under an hour, seemed longer. For me, its conclusion fell short of grace or definitude. But something about it all clearly reminded me to revolt.

* * * * * *

Choreographed and created in collaboration with Peter Born and performers Khadidiatou Bangoura, Peter Born, Audrey Hailes, Breyanna Maples, and AJ Wilmore.

Adaku's Revolt runs through March 24 with performances at various times. For information and tickets, click here.

Abrons Arts Center
466 Grand Street (at Pitt Street), Manhattan
(directions)

POOR PEOPLE'S TV ROOMM

Photo by Ian Douglas

The New York Times

APRIL 14, 2017

DANCE

An Artist Who Blurs Bodies and Genres in Protest

By SIOBHAN BURKE

Okwui Okpokwasili, whose new work, “Poor People’s TV Room,” is the culmination of a two-year residency at New York Live Arts. Credit: Todd Heisler/The New York Times

When Okwui Okpokwasili talks about her work, she treats each question like a knot to be unraveled, physically as much as verbally. Emphatic gestures punctuate her sentences, or complete them, as if movement might summon the answer.

“I want to fall apart, just enough,” she said recently over coffee near her Brooklyn home, discussing her approach to performing and making performance. Her palms opened like the pages of a book, suggesting a blank slate, or a readiness for anything. “And there’s this hope that something else can come through — I don’t know what.”

If you've seen Ms. Okpokwasili onstage — in her own genre-blurring work or in that by dance and theater artists like Ralph Lemon, Dean Moss and Young Jean Lee — you probably know what she means. Nearly six feet tall, with a hypnotic voice and limbs that swallow up space, she pushes herself to the edge as a performer, playing with extremes of ecstasy, sadness or rage with almost dangerous intensity.

Her Bessie Award-winning "Bronx Gothic," a fiercely intimate solo inspired by her Bronx upbringing (and the subject of a new documentary coming to Film Forum in July), began with her trembling to the point of near exhaustion. In Mr. Lemon's 2010 "How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?" she spent part of each performance in tears.

It's a certain kind of getting lost. "I'm looking for mysteries, looking for some useful confusion," she said.

While that goes for all of her work as a choreographer, writer, performer and director, Ms. Okpokwasili, 44, was referring to her latest, "Poor People's TV Room," which begins a two-week run at New York Live Arts on Wednesday, April 19.

From left, Nehemoyia Young, Ms. Okpokwasili, Katrina Reid and Thuli Dumakude and rehearsing "Poor People's TV Room" at New 42nd Street Studios. Credit: Todd Heisler/The New York Times

A collaboration with her husband and longtime creative partner, Peter Born, also 44, the project grew out of her interest in resistance movements propelled by women, black women in particular, and the body as a site of protest. Exploring themes of memory and invisibility, Ms. Okpokwasili, who is Nigerian-American, is joined by three women ranging in age from their late 20s to late 60s. (The oldest is the South African singer and Olivier Award-winning Broadway actress Thuli Dumakude.)

A meeting of dance, text, song, video and installation (Ms. Okpokwasili cringes at talk of disciplinary categories), “Poor People’s TV Room” is even more elusive, in terms of genre and story, than her previous works. Asked if there’s a narrative, she replied, “Kind of, -ish.”

Since its inception almost three years ago, as a 50-minute song that she performed in Lincoln Center’s David Rubenstein Atrium, the piece has passed through multiple iterations (and grown closer to 90 minutes), including performances in January at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which commissioned the work with Live Arts and Lumberyard.

“I think she doesn’t want it to be too legible in a concrete, narrative sense,” said Philip Bither, the Walker’s senior performing arts curator. “It has a certain logic, but it’s very hallucinatory, very dreamlike and surreal, and I think that’s all intentional.”

While the results may be porous, Ms. Okpokwasili pinpoints two specific sources of inspiration. In 2014 she became fascinated by the Bring Back Our Girls movement, the international response to the kidnapping of nearly 300 Nigerian schoolgirls by the terrorist group Boko Haram. She found it troubling that as the demand became a viral hashtag, touted by celebrities around the world, people lost sight of the movement’s originators, the mothers of the girls.

To Ms. Okpokwasili the phenomenon seemed to reflect “how the cultural contributions of black women, African women, have been erased,” she said in an email. “So I wanted to begin a kind of uncovering, for myself.” That brought her to an earlier instance of Nigerian women’s resistance, the Women’s War of 1929, in which thousands of Ibo women from southeastern Nigeria opposed the threat of taxes from British colonizers. Their struggle was known in the Ibo language as “egwu,” which means dance, and involved protest tactics rooted in the body, like older women baring their breasts in front of government officials.

While Ms. Okpokwasili’s initial inspirations may not be obvious in the final piece, they informed the questions that run through it and that she continues to ask. “What is it, my interest in brown bodies and brown women performing?” she said. “It’s about a staking of presence, of place, but how to do that in a way that doesn’t further entrench practices that diminish them?”

In thinking about those questions, she and Mr. Born have experimented with revealing and obscuring the body, aided by his set design, which includes large swaths of semitransparent plastic and a disorienting use of live-feed video. “Maybe you can’t see the things you want,” Ms. Okpokwasili said. “Here are these black bodies, and maybe there are ways in which you can’t have access to them.”

Ms. Okpokwasili and Ms. Reid rehearsing “Poor People’s TV Room,” Ms. Okpokwasil’s genre-blurring piece about protest and its erasure. Credit: Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Working as collaboratively as they do has taken time and space. In a phone interview, Mr. Born said the two had enjoyed "the luxury" of several residencies where they could assemble the work's many moving parts (a process that, under other circumstances, might be confined to a few rushed days). The most substantial was a two-year residency at Live Arts, one of the country's most coveted opportunities for choreographers, offering a full salary, health insurance, production funds and other resources.

"I get to wake up in the morning and just think about the piece," Mr. Born said. "I don't have to go be a P.A., I don't have to help load a truck. I did that for many years."

At a rehearsal two weeks before the New York premiere, the work was still in flux, with the script being tweaked, lines relearned and differences hashed out.

Both Ms. Okpokwasili and Mr. Born, who is white and grew up in Madison, Wis., said that argument is a driving force in their process. Many of their debates have revolved around the role of "spoken tongue language," as Ms. Okpokwasili calls it, versus the work's physical language, which at times suggests a body breaking into pieces or striving to keep another body alive.

"There's something so essential communicated by how these women are moving with each other that sometimes we're like, is the language superfluous?" Mr. Born said of the script, which he and Ms. Okpokwasili wrote together. Ms. Okpokwasili added, "Our fights over what the text is, or who gets to place this language in these bodies, have become kind of complicated."

For Ms. Okpokwasili, dancing, as much as speaking, is a form of questioning.

"There's a raw, feral quality to her being," said Mr. Lemon, who has worked with her for over a decade. When he first saw Ms. Okpokwasili dance, he said, "It was like looking at something I'd never seen before, certainly something I couldn't generate from my own body, and with this full commitment and incredible confidence.

"Playfully, I'd describe her as a sister from another planet."

Perhaps it's that planet where "Poor People's TV Room" resides. Katrina Reid, one of the performers, described entering the work's strange world as "coming upon an unmarked grave."

"It's been interesting to inhabit this space," she said, "where it's not about picking up the first answer or the easiest answer. It's about trying to find a truth, or multiple truths, or finding not even an answer but a more appealing question."

A version of this article appears in print on April 16, 2017, on Page AR10 of the New York edition with the headline: Falling Apart. But Only Just Enough.

THE NEW YORKER

APRIL 24, 2017

THE THEATRE

Okwui Okpokwasili Explores Politics and the Body

In "Poor People's TV Room," the performer turns her attention to historic incidents in Nigeria, the birthplace of her ancestors.

New York Live Arts | 219 W. 19th St. | 212-924-0077
By Hilton Als

In "Poor People's TV Room," Okpokwasili looks at the effects of history on Nigerian women. Illustration by Saiman Chow

When Okwui Okpokwasili speaks, let alone laughs, the sound comes from a deep place—from her diaphragm, certainly, but also from her history, which is as profound and complicated as the performer herself. Born in 1972 and raised in the Bronx, Okpokwasili is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. She graduated from Yale University in 1996, and since then she has danced with the choreographer Ralph Lemon and performed in the director and writer Young Jean Lee's "Lear," among other productions. Okpokwasili has always been a standout in New York's crowded performance scene, not least because of what she is able to do with her body: like a latter-day Judith Jamison, she makes whole narratives out of gestures—a back bend can intimate her irrepressible desire to take center stage and stay there.

In 2014, I saw Okpokwasili in her piece "Bronx Gothic," and the top of my head blew off. She was dressed in a dark slip, and her long arms and legs jerked and twitched in an atmosphere composed of strewn papers, lamps, a microphone, and a scrim devised by her frequent collaborator and husband, Peter Born. The show's script was a series of letters between two young girls in the Bronx; the talk turned to sex, and how little one knew about her body, and how much and how little the girls knew about how to connect. The piece is a tour de force on the order of Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," the author's seminal text on black girlhood and power.

Okwui Okpokwasili
Poor People's TV Room

Dance, Contemporary and experimental

Theater review by Helen Shaw
April 22, 2017

There are two different pieces inside Okwui Okpokwasili's Poor People's TV Room—one that is deeply informed by Nigerian political history, and one that washes over you as a mysterious chaos. I experienced them in syncopated time, because I read about the former after experiencing the latter. So, will you recognize the oblique references to Nigerian market bombings? Will you recognize the Igbo women's anti-imperialist protest actions? You can enter into Okpokwasili's dance-theater work either knowing or not.

Knowledge is power, but ignorance is a drug: one that lets you surrender swiftly to her dream world of fury, loss and tremendous unseen energies.

The preshow movement sequence is as beautiful as a stand-alone installation: It plays with silhouettes and doubling by using the set's main feature, a long wall made of stretched plastic. Designer Peter Born has set this sheeting at a diagonal across the New York Live Arts stage. And as we enter, Katrina Reid stands in front of it—frozen, backlit, back swayed, the heel of her hand to her forehead—while Okpokwasili shimmers like her brighter shadow, undulating in red light behind the blurring plastic. This is before the show begins. It's beside the point to talk about sequence in something that bleeds between dance-with-text and play-with-movement, but “scenes” in Poor People's TV Room include: a room tipped on its side that is righted by being seen in a video projection; a kind of ceremony for a woman wearing a suit made of metallic paillettes; a murmured comic monologue about t-shirt slogans (performed by Nehemoyia Young with the stunning actor Thuli Dumakude echoing her); and a recurring dialogue between a disturbed woman (Okpokwasili) and her much put-upon housegirl (Reid).

Roughly, the show is two interlocking duets. Young and Dumakude sit gossiping on plastic chairs, their voices swelling up into sudden conversation. Dumakude sets a fairytale tone: “There was a time way way back when Oprah was a human being. She had deep wells of feeling. But she stood outside herself; she could measure it from root to blossom.” Later, she plays a woman who has to help her dying child breathe, as Young does strange movement passes across the floor, lying down and pushing herself along with her feet. Meanwhile, on the right side of the stage, Okpokwasili and Reid perform their interactions lying down on the “wall” of the tipped-over room. They sometimes strike attitudes that seem familiar from paintings (Reid suckling Okpokwasili, the two of them crawling “up” the wall to exit).

Okpokwasili is performer of extraordinary grace and power. She has a low, thrilling voice; she dances her shuddering dances like she's been plugged into a power-source that won't let her rest. And if you have been watching her in other people's work, including in Ralph Lemon's sensational Scaffold Room last year, you know how electrifying she is onstage. But Poor People's TV Room is her own complete artistic statement: hers from root to blossom. Sometimes a sequence goes on too long; occasionally the intensity needs relief. But I can't think of a piece this year that's been so unabashedly gorgeous. It's a series of astonishments, an abstract work with focused power—and not a person in New York should miss it.

Okwui Okpokwasili. With ensemble cast.
New York Live Arts. Running time: 1hr 20mins. No intermission. Through April 29.

TIME OUT SAYS
5 OUT OF 5 STARS

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

DANCE

APRIL 1ST, 2017

Divining the Shadows

Okwui Okpokwasili's *Poor People's TV Room*

by Ivan Talijancic

As of this writing, the writer, performer, and choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili is entering the final phase of *Poor People's TV Room*, the multidisciplinary (and multisensory) performance she is creating in closely-knit partnership with her collaborator Peter Born. Three years in the making, this month's premiere also represents the culmination of Okpokwasili's extraordinary residency at New York Live Arts as their 2015 – 17 Randjelovic/Stryker Resident Commissioned Artist.

Katrina Reid and Okwui Okpokwasili in "Poor People's TV Room".
Photo: Mena Burnette of xmbphotography

Conversing with Okpokwasili over a (very long) lunch on the Upper East Side in late February, I learn that she is fresh on the heels of performing in a reading of Ntozake Shange's iconic work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975), directed by Anna Deavere Smith the night prior. Having first been exposed to this writing at the age of fifteen, Okpokwasili recalls just how seminal Shange's choreopoem had been in the context of her own work as a performance-maker. With its stylized language and free-flowing, non-linear narrative, *For Colored Girls* put forth more questions than answers, rendering the work a malleable text to be shaped by any reader (or director) who encountered it. As a Nigerian-American teen growing up in the Bronx, Okpokwasili found Shange's effortlessness in embodying the "brown girl experience" to be a revelation that still strikes a powerful chord within her own creations. "After last night, I was shivering and shimmering," Okpokwasili says. "I feel it in my navel."

For a moment, Okpokwasili's ruminations on the transformative power of poetry transport me to a visceral experience of my own. Last June, I ventured out to Governor's Island to witness an iteration of her current work, presented as part of the River To River Festival. Titled *when I return who will receive me*, the work was configured as a durational installation at Fort Jay. A fluid assemblage of research, discovered performance material, and "outtakes" from what will eventually become *Poor People's TV Room*, the work invited audiences to roam freely through the cavernous rooms, some filled with meditative tableaus, others, such as the main entrance lobby, resounded with powerful incantations performed by Okpokwasili herself. It felt like the performers' bodies were emanating words that had been soaked within their flesh for generations, as if I had entered a shrine, where stories, journeys, and memories commingled within an echo chamber of history. The effect was deeply affecting, with words blazed into my consciousness for a long time to come.

During our conversation, Okpokwasili connects the origin of this new work to the Bring Back Our Girls movement, a response to the April 2014 kidnapping of

nearly 300 girls from a school in Northern Nigeria by Boko Haram terrorists. Through a powerful use of memes, many local women (including the girls' mothers) implored their government—and indeed, the world at large, even eliciting a response from Michelle Obama—to take more steps to find the missing girls. Finding it to be a powerful example of self-advocacy and agency of African women, Okpokwasili felt that the phenomenon belied the narrative of their weakness and victimhood. In turn, her exploration of Bring Back Our Girls prompted her to look into the legacy of protest movements and their embodied practices throughout Nigerian history. Okpokwasili explains,

> For example, you would see older women baring their breasts to shame those who would look at them. Or, women building collective chants and singing them around the private residence of a particular official. It's as if a group of women [were to sit] on the White House lawn singing about Russians, or [...] "show me your taxes."

And indeed, she found a way to embody these notions in the very first iteration of the piece in June 2014 in the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center. A solo performance by Okpokwasili, the piece consisted of a fifty-minute song she created as an attempt to mimic the aforementioned protest practices. This song (as do many elements of Okpokwasili's research) will resurface in this month's premiere, but will be sung *sotto voce*, almost inaudibly, by one of the performers.

Okpokwasili's work houses a desire to unearth histories that are buried in the flesh. In her own words:

> The historical knowledge, the spiritual knowledge [...] what is that inarticulable shadow—can you touch it? Hopefully the piece that we are making operates in this space of trying to excavate something hidden to the surface. Maybe out of my own concerns about invisibility around blackness or darkness, and making presence—making something more visible. I am dealing with black women being seen, shaping how they are being seen, but also making sure that what is seen is three- and four-dimensional. I am interested in seeing how we can make spaces where certain spirits can rise that you didn't know about, that were hidden. They might be connected to forgotten people, places, cultures, a forgotten language.

In creating this new work, Okpokwasili has also considered her own complicated relationship with Nigeria, being an Igbo woman growing up in the Bronx. She recalls visiting her homeland and feeling like an alien, but also feeling marginalized stateside. “I start thinking [about] all the different ways of making things visible,” she says, “always looking for signs that I feel mark my connection to these traditions, languages, cultures.” For Okpokwasili, an obvious and immediate connection was the Nollywood film industry, which began humbly in 1990s and eventually became a highly profitable market. Specifically, Okpokwasili was fascinated with Nollywood as a point of intersection of multiple cultures, both Western and African. Often trafficking in mythology, the industry’s framework rose out of the fatigue of looking at the Western tropes. “As is the case with my work, Nollywood is not looking for purity,” Okpokwasili adds, “It is about finding a strange perspective.”

Speaking about influences on her current work, Okpokwasili references the writings of Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian novelist whose work was inspired by Yoruba folk tales, and specifically a narrative structure that’s not rooted in the Western form of story projection. Okpokwasili appreciates the immediacy of being thrust into a condition, with no support to explain frequently surreal events. This device is reflective of the oral traditions handed down from generation to generation among her ancestry. Of translating the form into a theatrical context, Okpokwasili comments:

> You posit certain things that shouldn’t be, but you don’t explain too much. You make some kind of a tunnel for people to come into a particular condition. I’m interested in operating in a psychic space—I find that to be the most fertile place if we are going to have a live exchange. There is a kind of conjuring taking place, for the performers as well. How can you spin that world, lose yourself in it, and also make a vortex that draws people in?

With this month’s premiere at New York Live Arts fast approaching, I ask Okpokwasili to reflect on the impact that two years in the Randjelovic/Stryker Resident Commissioned Artist program had on the creation of *Poor People’s TV Room*. “It felt like a springboard,” she says, “that you could just jump on and go.” The prestigious residency drew in additional commissioning partners, and

granted Okpokwasili and her partner, Peter Born, the freedom to immerse themselves in the research and to work on the piece itself.

As she is preparing to complete the journey of creating *Poor People's TV Room,* Okpokwasili revisits the work's thematic terrain:

> I deal a lot with memory and the unreliability of it [...] I look for latent cultural memories, or latent bodies in me that I can find a way to surface through certain practices. I love the idea of trying to recall things—most of my pieces are attempts to recall, attempts not to be lost.

The New York premiere of *Poor People's TV Room* will run April 19 – 22 and April 26 – 29 at New York Live Arts (219 West 19th Street, New York).

CONTRIBUTOR

Ivan Talijancic

IVAN TALIJANCIC is a founder and artistic co-director of WaxFactory, a New York-based interdisciplinary art group. He is currently completing his first feature film, *416 MINUTES*, and regularly writes on dance for London-based *Bachtrack*.

ARTFORUM

PERFORMANCE

Phantom of the Oprah

07.05.17

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Poor People's TV Room*, 2017. Performance view, New York Live Arts, April 18, 2017. Photo: Paul B. Goode.

"THERE WAS A TIME—way, way back—when Oprah was a human being, just a woman, she felt pain and she suffered. She felt fear and desire."

So begins the storytelling in *Poor People's TV Room*, a performance conceived by Okwui Okpokwasili, coauthored, designed, and directed in collaboration with Peter Born. Part theater, part dance, part installation, the piece hovers in an undefined space and time, conjuring the stories of four women: Merit (Katrina Reid), Madame (Okpokwasili), Honor (Thule Dumakude), and Yeru (Nehemoyia Young). From the grand tales of Oprah's origin myth to the intimate gossip about one another; from stories about children and mothers and others who are no longer present to the descriptions of violence and death and T-shirts bearing slogans, the world they speak of is at once tender and viperous.

The performance is composed almost like a piece of music, in sections and phrases—monologues that erupt, dialogues that echo. The staging is split in two: Yeru and Honor sit on outdoor chairs, chatting with each other, sometimes repeating one another's words in a way that sounds incantatory, if static. In her living room, Madame fusses and fights with Merit, her house girl, seeing things, lashing out at her young minder though she thrives by suckling at her bare breast. Words are heavy always, passed as wisdom and as weight—and they are not always to be trusted. As the radiant and exquisite Honor warns in a vivid, seething monologue:

I want to pry open your mouth—wide. I want to look deep in your throat. I know I'll find a lie in there. I will go in there and I will grab that lie and I will drag it up across your tongue and out of your mouth. And I will stomp it into the truth.

Okpokwasili is a powerhouse artist with a molten presence on stage: steely, ever fluid. In *Bronx Gothic*, her 2014 solo piece that was recently adapted for film, she delivered intimate correspondences between two girls in the early bloom of adolescence and sexuality as she shivered and shook, as though she was the medium—the receiver—through which this tale must pass. Although her voice shifted registers as she spoke as one girl and then as the other, Okpokwasili bypassed the usual expressions of character, of literal embodiment, to locate the story somewhere nearer to the realm of phantoms. The words were all hers—she wrote the play, based on her own childhood—but her besieged body seemed to mark the distances through the thick muck of memory that her words had to travel to leave her mouth.

The spirit-characters of *Poor People's TV Room* are embodied more firmly, forthrightly, though they're not always clearly defined. The four women appear before us as something closer to visitations, materializing between the conditions of presence and absence, their voices alighting across song and stories, their bodies bearing burdens. At the top of the play, a woman covered in a blanket crawls across the stage; nearby, another dances before an opaque scrim, behind which we see another dancing too, her body blurred—we can just make out shape and color and movement through the plastic film.

Okwui Okpokwasili, *Poor People's TV Room*, 2017. Performance view, New York Live Arts, April 18, 2017. Photo: Paul B. Goode.

Video also places these bodies apart from us, gives their absence/presence another dimension. In a beautiful, classic piece of stagecraft, a large table becomes a second stage on which Okpokwasili and Reid play the scenes between Madame and Merit while lying on their backs. With a video camera hanging overhead, and the tabletop decorated with wallpaper, a chair, and a window, the performers pose as though the room were "real," upright. On the screen suspended above, we watch them, projected into this other space, with tiny slips of visual sense—Okpokwasili's dress falling between her legs, the way both performers lean against the "wall"—to note that their image bears a different gravity than the rest of the room.

In some respects, *Poor People's TV Room* is most directly about power and speech, via language and movement. How do words conjure the world, manifest our destinies and our selves, infuse earthbound lives with both the levity and heaviness of myth? What do bodies say, what do they know and hold, that can be read or heard or understood—or denied, destroyed? Okpokwasili and Born make no sharp point about all of this, though their source materials are rich and devastating: the "Bring Back Our Girls" movement/meme; the Igbo Women's War of 1929; suicide bombings in the public markets of Northern Nigeria, often young women detonating themselves spurred on by the Boko Haram.

These subjects aren't made explicit except in glimmers—we hear what sounds like the remixed recordings of women's voices, the rhythms of their clapping hands and stomping feet—which is a shame since these are women and stories that rarely appear inside a New York theater. The piece is designed to be haunting, not altogether legible, yet it feels in some respects unresolved, like its central force hasn't yet been fully harnessed. Its many facets mesmerize—the women are all marvelous to watch, and moment-to-moment there are resonant ideas, and graceful gestures—but the abstractions aren't counterbalanced by even light anchors to orient and pull us through the whirl to a place we might come to know with greater clarity.

And yet the show throughout imparted a deep feeling of how bodies share parts of each other with one another, how they sustain, how they connect: with mother's milk, with breath, with stories—and with theater. At one point, Okpokwasili sings in her rich, beautiful voice:

I'm irradiated
I'm illuminated
I'm intoxicated
I'm emblazoned
I won't loosen this thread, no
I will wind it tighter
I will bind us closer
I will knot us up…
Don't leave a wound tonight.

Standing there before us, channeling radical self-possession (and radical other-possession too), though belied by something grievous, she appeared to be singing to and for us, her audience, leaving no wound, but opening us to and for something more and more and more.

— Jennifer Krasinski

Poor People's TV Room *premiered at New York Live Arts from April 19-22 and 26-29. Andrew Rossi's film* Bronx Gothic*, based on Okpokwasili's 2014 performance, premieres July 12 through 25 at Film Forum in New York.*

the village VOICE

In “Poor People’s TV Room,” Okwui Okpokwasili Sheds Light on Women’s Enduring Power

By ELIZABETH ZIMMER
APRIL 25, 2017

Okwui Okpokwasili and Katrina Reid share the floor. PAUL B. GOODE

As we enter the theater at New York Live Arts, *Poor People’s TV Room* has already begun; figures move on the wide stage, both behind and before a sheet of translucent, striated plastic. The space is divided by an extension cord feeding a simple clamp light. To the left, two plastic armchairs sit in the dark. To the right, an elaborate construction resembling a low table is fronted by a large flat-screen monitor; hanging above it are table lamps, lying on their sides in the air. In front of it, another plastic armchair.

Moving among and between these objects are four barefoot women who appear to have nothing but the clothes they wear. Okwui Okpokwasili — who conceived *Poor People’s TV Room* and wrote it with director and designer Peter Born — is behind the plastic, dancing intently, naked to her waist. Loud industrial sound fills the room. The other women (Thuli Dumakude, Katrina Reid,

and Nehemoyia Young) speak softly, barely audible except when they stand and declaim, reporting history or the news or observations about Oprah, who is somehow a godhead in this environment, part of both the forces of oppression and the hope for release. We seem to be in both the present (Young wears contemporary workout clothes) and in some colonial past, in an Africa where spirits may suddenly appear, embodied in mysterious sparkling garments.

Okpokwasili herself is loud, imperious, either the mistress of the peculiar tilted house on the right, or somehow delusional, or both. The performers lie on the table but through the magic of video appear to us to be upright, sitting or standing, looking out a window at clouds. Reid sits in a wooden chair; Okpokwasili, after berating her, lies across her lap and suckles at her breast. Sometimes she rants about the power structure in the Nigerian market town where, it appears, this quartet is imprisoned.

On the other side, Dumakude — the elder in this group, in real life an award-winning South African performer, writer, and director — and Young talk quietly; we catch snippets of their conversation about T-shirt slogans. Young reports growing a tail, which she cuts off and buries, but which grows back and turns into another girl. In the middle of the stage, Okpokwasili and Reid roll together on the floor, head to head, back to back. As the ninety-minute piece unfolds, we gather that Reid has recently given birth but that the child has not survived. These women have undergone unspeakable hardships but continue to speak. Perhaps they are hallucinating; perhaps they are seers, poets, managing their difficult situation with the courage of their female power.

Born's lighting casts the huge sheet of plastic sometimes as water, sometimes as sky, sometimes as desert, and picks out the performers in concentrated solos. The uncredited sound score modulates to a pattern of breath, then swells to evoke trucks, gunfire, aircraft.

For the past decade Okpokwasili, a Nigerian American raised in the Bronx, has been responsible for, or part of, the most compelling performance work to be seen on this country's stages. This new piece, in development for several years, requires intense concentration on the part of its audience — and repays it in kind. Closer in form to poetry or liturgy than to conventional drama or dance, its riveting text invokes popular tropes (Oprah's face on a piece of toast! her profile in the dimples of a potato chip!) and recounts a series of magical transformations. It tells of a woman who becomes, by turns, a cat, an ox, a butterfly, a fish, a cobra, an impala, a yellow leaf, and, finally, the dust between the toes of a chimpanzee.

Okpokwasili and Born have taken on a huge challenge: to represent, for American audiences now, the horrors of colonial Nigeria some ninety years ago, and the ways those forms of oppression linger in contemporary behavior. We may leave bewildered, or we, too, may be transformed.

Poor People's TV Room
New York Live Art
219 West 19th Street
212-924-0077, newyorklivearts.org
Through April 29

BRONX GOTHIC

Photo by Ian Douglas

The New York Times

THEATER | THEATER REVIEW

Some Girls Just Know Things

In 'Bronx Gothic,' Lessons About Growing Up Female

Okwui Okpokwasili in "Bronx Gothic," part of the Coil festival, one of several off-kilter theater series this month. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

By RACHEL SALTZ

JAN. 15, 2014

Before people are even seated for "Bronx Gothic" at Danspace Project, Okwui Okpokwasili is moving. Her back to the audience, she does a shimmying, herky-jerky kind of dance. It seems like a private ritual, a gathering of forces or, maybe, a summoning of the muse. And it goes on so long, 20 minutes or so, that you worry she'll knock herself out. Or exhaust your patience.

She doesn't.

"I want to share something with you," she says at last. It's a story of innocence (well, relatively) and experience that grows out of a series of notes passed between two 11-year-old girls, one of whom is based on Ms. Okpokwasili, who wrote and performs this solo show.

“Bronx Gothic,” part of the Coil festival, has dance elements and songs, but storytelling is its core. In language that is by turns blunt and poetic, crudely funny and incantatory, Ms. Okpokwasili conjures and probes this adolescent friendship, a jumble of insults, anger and love.

Many of the passed notes, which she reads from crumpled papers or pulls from her memory, turn on sex. (“You can’t have an orgasm with a Frisbee,” says the experienced girl to the more innocent one.) Periods, pubic hair, breasts, erections, semen and oral sex all come under the microscope, as does beauty. “You know you ugly,” says Experience to Innocence — not to mention dirty and smelly.

We’re used to hearing this kind of talk — raw, unmediated by political correctness — from men and boys in theaters. But it still feels daring and unusual to hear it from a female perspective, more daring, really, than the show’s blurred genres, which just seem to be the way this performer needs to tell this story.

Bits of “Bronx Gothic,” directed by Peter Born (who also designed the set and did the lighting), may be too private or too overthought, as when Ms. Okpokwasili puts her head in a plastic shopping bag that has been ominously dangling from the ceiling. But the show is also nicely open- ended, though specific when it needs to be about culture and place: Orchard Beach, Nathan’s hot dogs, Whitney Houston’s hair, and Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam are all called out.

And Ms. Okpokwasili, who was Hippolyta in Julie Taymor’s recent “Midsummer’s Night Dream,” is a magnetic performer. In a voice that can be confiding or terrifying and movement that can be ugly or sinuous, she holds the show together, lending her story unexpected emotional and physical contours.

A version of this review appears in print on January 16, 2014, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: Some Girls Just Know Things.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/16/theater/in-bronx-gothic-lessons-about-growing-up-female.html

The Stage

Bronx Gothic review at Young Vic, London – ‘breathtakingly hypnotic dance-theatre’

Okwui Okpokwasili in Bronx Gothic at Young Vic, London. Photo: Helen Murray

By Rosemary Waugh

June 6, 2019

Okwui Okpokwasili’s solo show, inspired by her memories of growing up in New York’s Bronx, starts with a prolonged period of shaking. The performer and writer vibrates with a deadly, overwhelming energy that causes her flesh to ripple in repeated waves from her ankles to her neck.

This ritualistic, rapid discharge of energy is physically impressive, yet what’s more immediately shocking is the perspiration coating Okpokwasili when she eventually turns to face us. Bronx Gothic is a masterpiece of physicality and endurance in which a single body becomes a vessel channelling memories, histories, suppressions, desires and sorrows.

It’s also a beguilingly clever piece of storytelling. Okpokwasili intercuts passages of dance with readings from a collection of notes passed between two semi- fictionalised schoolgirls. It would be easy to get distracted by the sexually explicit parts, when in fact, Okpokwasili, like the best of gothic storytellers, is subtly leading the audience towards a devastating conclusion that arrives seemingly while everyone is looking the other way.

Directed and designed by Peter Born, the cloaked-off stage area, which is dotted with multiple table lamps and miniature plants, doesn’t really warrant the advertised description of “visual art installation” but the piece is a mesmerising expression of black girlhood and female sexuality –existing in a fluid, liminal space between waking and dreaming. It’s rare to see a performer sincerely offer so much of themselves to an audience. The result is breathtaking.

Verdict

Hypnotic dance-theatre solo show about the silence, violence and sexual power of girls.

* * * * *

‘Bronx Gothic’: the year’s most intense dance show

New York dancer Okwui Okpokwasili’s form-breaking, bone-shaking solo show is coming to London

By Alice Saville
Tuesday, June 4 2019

Okwui Okpokwasili, Bronx Gothic. Photo: Ian Douglas

Okwui Okpokwasili is a star of avant-garde dance – and Jay-Z’s ‘4:44’ video. Her solo show ‘Bronx Gothic’ begins with a fearsomely intense feat of endurance as her whole body vibrates with twerk-inspired movements that summon up the tension of being a teenage girl growing up in the Bronx. The show’s last performance inspired an acclaimed 2017 documentary; after watching it, Young Vic boss Kwame Kwei-Armah persuaded her to resurrect it.

‘Bronx Gothic’ was a huge success in the US. Why did you retire it?

‘The last performance I did was in the St Peter’s Church complex, the church I went to growing up. It was such a perfect way to say goodbye to those characters – to leave them back in the Bronx. Also, the show takes a toll psychically and physically. It’s like sprinting really hard. When you’re done, your body’s like “phew”. I needed to breathe.’

Does that discomfort come from its closeness to your own experiences?

‘The piece is not autobiographical at all, but it is true that it’s marked with pieces of my life. Coming through adolescence is akin to being a reptile sloughing off old skin, and there’s something of that in my movements at the beginning of the piece. When I was writing it I was also thinking about novels like “Dracula” and “Frankenstein”; that’s where some of the gothic comes in. As a young girl, we would send notes to each other during class. So I create this epistolary narrative as exposed by the notes between these two girls. It’s set in the mists of this underworld space that’s hidden from adults.’

Does it matter if people see the documentary before the show?

‘I don’t know. The live performance is a completely different animal. We’re all uncomfortably close and we’re looking at each other; there’s a psychic terrain that we’re playing in. Magic can happen, or nothing can happen – but there’s something about being next to each other, right?’

I guess I have to ask what it was like to work with Jay-Z on ‘4:44’?

‘Oh my gosh, I didn’t work with Jay-Z! I was in the video, but I’ve never met him. I almost didn’t even hear the music. It was very… secret. We had earbuds so that nobody else could hear what Storyboard P, the other dancer, and I were listening to. It’s funny seeing its afterlife because it’s like: yes, it’s a good song and Jay-Z is not to be messed with, but sometimes I forget that I did that.’

You’ve just won a MacArthur ‘genius’ grant, which is worth $625,000 (£493,000). Will that make a big difference to you?

‘Totally! It’s a MacArthur Fellowship grant. People say “genius” but genius isn’t technically part of the title. I’m just saying… but yeah, it’s this lovely, wonderful thing. Like having someone go: “What you’re doing, yes, it may be kinda weird, maybe some people don’t understand it, but take courage.” ’

‘Bronx Gothic’ is at the Young Vic. Until Jun 29.

Okwui Okpokwasili performs “Bronx Gothic”

By *Linda Ravenswood*
Tuesday, July 22nd, 2014

In the corner of the theatre, as the audience files in, performer Okwui Okpokwasili has already begun her *tour de force*. With her back to the crowd, she shows a flash of sleek, muscular, jittering, twitching, red/black flesh – rippling in a wine colored, open-backed, sundress. A see – saw violin and crashing bellows music is arranged to conform with and move against her gestures. Tall and wiry, like a gazelle, she moves like liquid, rasping and charging in air. Dust and flesh and sweat collect as she undulates. Around her, low table lamps nestle upturned, sideways, upright on the ground. Weeds and flowers and plastic bags spill across the stage floor.

A twitching marionette, Okpokwasili isolates her movements like a rickety cart correcting itself over deep stones, like a boxer readying, rallying his nerves in the corner of the ring. This vision is frenetic – as if the ring she works in has been precariously placed above subway rails. The once simple gesture of her left hand to her mouth creates an unknown semiotic. Her right arm stretches out, a loose electric wire undulating over the city. A wet earth sail, a scarecrow, a woman exhausting herself in memory, in dance, in duration, nearing ecstasy – we sense she is creating ceremony. Like a Balinese shadow puppet she breaks her body and brings it back every second.

For twenty minutes this goes on, and still she has not turned to face the audience. The music swells, a deep kettledrum, a deep subway sound rattles her motions ever higher. Like a body on a speeding train, she shakes endlessly, on the way. Then, gunshot music, kids calling, she is stirring, cooking, and still she doesn’t turn around.

Suddenly, the music falls to droning keys, an unseen hand on the shrill pipes. She steps backwards, and faces us. She pulls her dress away from her body as if to ventilate her heart. The twitching is ceaseless as a muffled newscast is heard. Suddenly her arms dive and arc behind her, as if she’s holding a mountain of snow, or another person on her back. She slides towards a standing lamp that is also a microphone. As she approaches it, she slows, and – as if perspiring on cue – she starts to glow and glisten. She stares ahead. On the ground are

folded papers, pocket sized and yellow, wrinkled and unwrinkled – hand written notes. She takes one and unfolds it and begins starts to read.

What she shares is seemingly a conversation between two people; two Bronx schoolgirls relaying stories of sexuality, and the mysteries of pre and post pubescent awakenings. As she reads, she kneels and sings, slippery sweat falling onto the microphone. Her perspiration rushes onto the floor, through her dress; streams of sweat drops fall into the darkness. She falls onto the floor, designating sex moves, orgasm stories, "her sweating eyes." Two characters speak, fast and then slow, she intones, "Look up at the sky, now ask yourself, am I awake?"

Lying on her back, poems stick to her; she works her toes to curl backwards, her dress is drenched. This is ancient girl energy. This is a feminist *griot*. The *griot* holds and shares epic stories, of heroes and legendary men and women, but the *griot* sometimes does not tell stories from this kind of passage, from this bloody girl/dream. Okpokwasili valorizes and illuminates these powerful stories in an intensely satisfying way; she reminds us that girls are powerful, that girls are in transition, that girls are sexual. Girls are hungry, girls are dirty talkers when they want to be, they might be ruthless, funny, gritty, and wise. That this is an anomaly in parlance, in the theatre, in our literature, and collective consciousness is curious. We hear about boys heading out to become something, but not as often about girls… Do young women not burst forth into new worlds? Of course they do.

Okpokwasili reads, "No one break in, do graffiti all up in inside her," She posits, "Ask me – can we be bound together?" She slaps her own face. How personal is too personal? On stage, in intimate performance – is this catharsis, psychotherapy, a council, an exorcism? Is not this what is requested of the artist – to go where the others refuse? Or is this the work of a minister or a medical doctor. Could all of these personas live within her?

Before the performance, a man and a woman were in a parked car, the man raging, jumping out of his SUV and crawling around to the woman's door – animal, raging, spewing hate, and leaking all of his failures. I wondered if this was something they did notoriously, venting this way – I wondered if there was a way to see the woman's face, to try to know if she needed help, the police, friends, rescue from his mania. I stayed, but not too close; I swung my leg as I pretended to wait for someone, I sipped my coffee. Still he raged on, and then glass was breaking. He muttered, that these were his things to break. Then the car peeled away. For a moment he looked at me, through the windshield like he was going to tear his SUV across the street and up onto the pavement where I stood – but the oncoming cars seemed to force him right. Later, I wondered, is all of this grief and violence a contagion, something that landed on Okwui Okpokwasili and called to her that she could reshape and disintegrate?

http://www.artsbeatla.com/2014/07/okwui-okpokwasili/

Chicago Tribune

The big bang of 'Bronx Gothic' starts 'OnEdge' series

By Laura Molzahn

Who would want to be 11 again? The cusp of puberty feels like drowning. But that tidal wave of out-of-control change also arguably merely distills, intensifies, the essential mysteries and tragedies of human life at any age.

New York-based writer-performer-choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili takes us to that terrible place in "Bronx Gothic" — and holds our feet to the fire. Through Saturday at Links Hall, this tour de force one-woman show, directed and designed by Peter Born, is a propitious opener for the city's third annual "OnEdge" series (whose four remaining shows end March 4). Okpokwasili is quite simply a virtuoso, an exquisite singer, speaker, writer, mover, a siren who draws us to danger.

Born's scenic design transforms the space into a soft, white cocoon of curtains softly lit by lamplight and ringed with potted plants — many of them overturned. But distress, and excess, immediately mark the show: The first half-hour of "Bronx Gothic" consists of Okpokwasili in a corner of the room, back to us, in a St. Vitus' dance of violent vibrations, little hops and jumps, undulations and bobbings. Repetitive "music" of just a few notes or rhythms is finally superseded by what seems the roar of a train, then a cascade of voices raised in alarm, argument, laughter.

Though the setting is specific — an African-American Bronx neighborhood of the 1980s — Okpokwasili writes in a program note that the work isn't autobiography. It does "play out in the rough terrain of memory," she adds, perhaps like the

"biomythography" of African-American feminist writer Audre Lorde, whose poem "A Litany for Survival" is excerpted in the program.

Once Okpokwasili starts speaking, the power and ingenuity of her writing and performance are instantly apparent. She speaks primarily in the personas of two young girls, trading obsessive notes in that pre-texting era, each differentiated by the timbre of her voice and degree of sexual experience. Later, Okpokwasili channels two boyfriends — one ostensibly an adult, the other an adult looking back on his adolescence — and a harsh, hardened mother. Each is embodied as well as voiced. In a longer movement sequence, Okpokwasili, on her hands and knees, is forced down to the floor, as if someone were pushing her, and clambers back up over and over.

Funny, obscure, convoluted, repetitive, horrible in its insinuations, "Bronx Gothic" is exhausting for performer and viewer alike. It is very, very female in every detail, obsessed with bodily fluids, especially with blood, and sex — hysterical, excessive, in true gothic style. Innocence and experience, virginity and its loss, the overwhelming need for female friendship, which creates a cycle of admiration and jealousy, of love and hate: All are central. And universal.

Dreams — captured in brilliant, confounding language — encapsulate the rough divide between outward action and inner experience, privileging neither. What is real? Who are we? What are our lives? Are we alone and helpless always? Okpokwasili goes way overboard in "Bronx Gothic," but then that's puberty, right? That's life.

http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-bronx-gothic-dance-review-ent-0222-20160220-column.html

CULTUREBOT
MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE

BRONX GOTHIC – OKWUI OKPOKWASILI

Rennie McDougall | October 30, 2015 |

Muscle twitch now spasm, palms flexed and head shake no no yes. Fast heels and feet treading, grounding down but pulsing up. Pelvis everything, heat radiating, sweat, kick sharply, blink, unmissed. In a crowd alone, quick crumple, sudden squeezes, long release.

Okwui Okpokwasili dances in a corner, faced away. Her body; a violent shudder, a pleasurable eruption, a private sexuality. Okpokwasili puts it into words herself. "The world becomes a universe in my belly."

Bronx Gothic is a solo performance created and performed by Okpokwasili, with directing and design collaborator Peter Born. Part dance, part spoken monologue, a dream-like personal excavation into the deep histories – both playful and painful – of childhood, of being black, of being a woman, and of discovering the layers of sexuality.
The Bessie-award-winning Okpokwasili premiered *Bronx Gothic* in 2014 at PS 122, and the work has since toured nationally and internationally, now returning to New York, presented by New York Live Arts.

"I wanna share something with you," the first words she speaks. This is a storytelling, reminding of times when histories were preserved this way. From gothic horror (her microphone doubles as a menacing under-face light) to coming-of-age schoolbook literature; from beat poetry open-mic to fireside storytelling.

Amidst Born's domestic marshes of lampshade discards, with light ebbing behind a white curtain backdrop, Okpokwasili reads from private notes passed between 11-year old school girls; frankly exchanged speculations on sex; letters sent to end friendships; lessons in lucid dreaming.

Her text is intricately woven. Okpokwasili moves us back and forth in time seamlessly, literarily disorienting but never lost. Autobiography and fiction dissolve into each other, as do the experiences of her characters; herself, a best friend, a boyfriend, a mother; all reside in her transforming body.

What unfolds is a portrait of collective experiences, transcending the purely personal. The fear and aggression instilled by a young mother's rhyming wisdom "When bitches bleed, they lose speed." A stream of racial abuse transformed into a break-neck poetry. The vivid torment of hellish dreams; bodies burning in boiling oceans.

At one moment, we are revealed to Okpokwasili, the lights encompassing the audience. Our relationship to observing is one of mannered composure.

As a point of contrast, at a recent night of performance titled *afroFUTUREqu##r* – an evening of "Afro-future-queer" performances curated by Thomas F. DeFrantz and niv Acosta – the culture of that audience, more predominately African-American, was to engage directly with the performance; to speak to the performers, to sing along when music was sung, to clap out rhythms for the performer to dance to, all without invitation required. The exchange was overwhelmingly celebratory.
Okpokwasili is speaking to a different audience, and she is conscious of this context. She is looking to us across a distance, aware of how far we may feel from each other's experiences, but inviting us to imagine our togetherness.

But her physicality… it is something so vital, performing seems an essence of her. She is a magnet for the gaze, her "belly" the center of an ever-expanding creation. Every narrative she tells can be profoundly understood in her opening dance, before the language translates it for us. Her pain, pleasure, fear, shame, sociality, sexuality; I know it through this quivering aggressive ritual. Embodied wisdom bursting.

http://www.culturebot.org/2015/10/24884/bronx-gothic-okwui-okpokwasili/