sweat variant /
Okwui Okpokwasili & Peter Born

Photo by Maria Baranova

For booking information:
Lotus Arts Management | Sophie Myrtil-McCourty, *President* | 347.721.8724 | Sophie@LotusArtsMgmt.com | LotusArtsMgmt.com
Annabel Heacock, *Company Producer* | AnnabelH@SweatVariant.com

About

sweat variant is the collaborative practice of Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born. Since 1996, they have been working at the intersection of dance, theater, and visual art to make challenging and rigorous work that reaffirms that which has been deemed marginal as the true center through the exploration of Black interiority. Okpokwasili and Born are interested in building a spectacle of radical intimacy, in which both performers and audience are acknowledged as being locked in a mutual gaze. They hope to activate a space that allows the audience to question who they are looking at, and how they are looking.

Okpokwasili and Born have created the Bessie Award-winning *pent up: a revenge dance* and *Bronx Gothic*. The latter continues to tour internationally, most recently to the 2024 Milan Triennale. Other performances include *let slip, hold sway, adaku, part 1: the road opens, Adaku's Revolt, swallow the moon, Sitting on a Man's Head*, and *poor people's TV room*, which also toured the US. Their work has been featured internationally, including at the Berlin Biennale, the Young Vic, and the Tate. Recent works include installations in the exhibitions Grief and Grievance, Art and Mourning in America at the New Museum (NYC), Witchhunt at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and Sex Ecologies at Kunsthall Trondheim in Norway. *poor people's TV room (solo) installation* is in the Hammer Museum and Whitney Museum collections.

Okwui Okpokwasili (she/her) is a Brooklyn-based performer, actor, choreographer, and writer. Okpokwasili has earned numerous accolades, including a 2025 Art Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 2018 Princeton University Hodder Fellowship, a 2018 Herb Alpert Award, a 2018 Doris Duke Artist Award, and a 2018 MacArthur Fellowship. Okpokwasili was the 2015-2017 Randjelovic/Stryker New York Live Arts Resident Commissioned Artist. She was the inaugural artist for the Kravis Studio Residency program at MoMA in 2022, and an artist in residence at the Brown Arts Institute in 2023. She continues to collaborate with Ralph Lemon, Kevin Beasley, Saidiya Hartman, and Kaneza Schaal, among other artists.

Peter Born (he/him) works as a director, composer, and designer of performance and installation. In collaboration with Okpokwasili, Peter's work has been featured in the Berlin Biennale, "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America" at the New Museum, "Witch Hunt" at the Hammer Museum, "Loophole of Retreat: Venice", "sex ecologies" at Kunsthall Trondheim, as well as performance work at MoMA, the Whitney Museum, MASS MoCA, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and ICA Boston, among others. He is the recipient of four 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.

Selected 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 Zimmer, *The Village Voice*

my tongue is a blade

"I can think of no other contemporary dancer than Okpokwasili who transports herself so convincingly out of her current consciousness into another astral plane, taking us with her."

– Susan Yung, *The Brooklyn Rail*

"Sweat Variant has a long track record of exploring the space between dance, theater, and visual art, while tracing themes of embodied inheritance and Black interiority. All of these elements appear throughout *my tongue is a blade*. It's the strength of visual metaphor—seeing only fragments of the whole, glimpsing others in slivers, and catching my own reflection staring back—that surprises me."

– Caedra Scott-Flaherty, *ThINKingDANCE*

let slip, hold sway

"The work, which Okpokwasili and Born have dubbed a 'durational practice' is, in my opinion, a contemporary ritual—a powerful embodied practice of connection, recollection, grieving, healing, and transformation–transformative for the viewer as well as the doer. Dance, used in this way, has been all but lost in our modern world of capital and concepts. Perhaps with the ancestral wisdom of 'looking back to see forward' and Sweat Variant's fearless experimentation, we can find our way back and retrieve it."

– Karen Greenspan, *Fjord*

adaku, part 1: the road opens

"The storytelling impulse sits alongside an older impulse to make, to craft, to generate the act of making art a kind of engine that activates live in front of an audience to create a vibrational exchange, one that resonates more gutturally than the beats of narrative."

– Rennie McDougall, *Gagosian Magazine*

"Psychology and magic, art and compassion mingle in their conversations; in addition to all of her other skills, the MacArthur-winning Okpokwasili is a formidable analyst of the human condition."

– Elizabeth Zimmer, *The Village Voice*

"Listen to these songs, absorb these rhythms. Okpokwasili (the Bronx-born child of immigrants from Nigeria) and her ensemble are the next generation, and they will lead us old white fossils — who've been flailing in the public space for half a century — into the peril and promise of the unfolding millennium."

– Elizabeth Zimmer, *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 WWand 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."

– Zoe 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 quite simply a virtuoso, an exquisite 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 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?"

– 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."

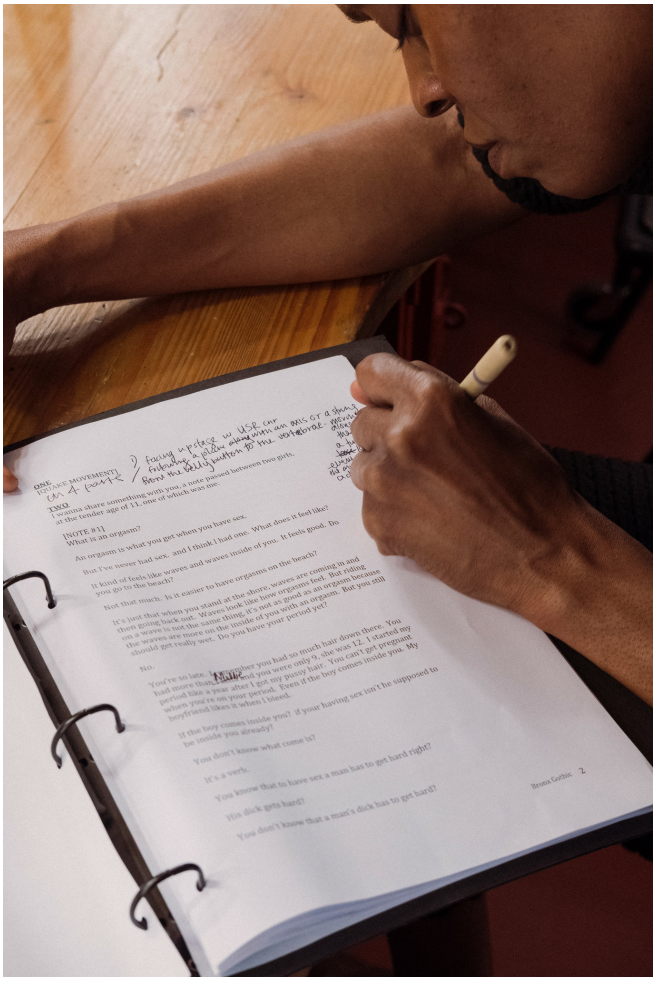
For such visceral performances, Okpokwasili was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the honor informally referred to as the "genius grant," in 2018. It was an acknowledgment of her work pushing performance art past its limits in nonlinear, interdisciplinary narratives that incorporate, to astonishing effect, 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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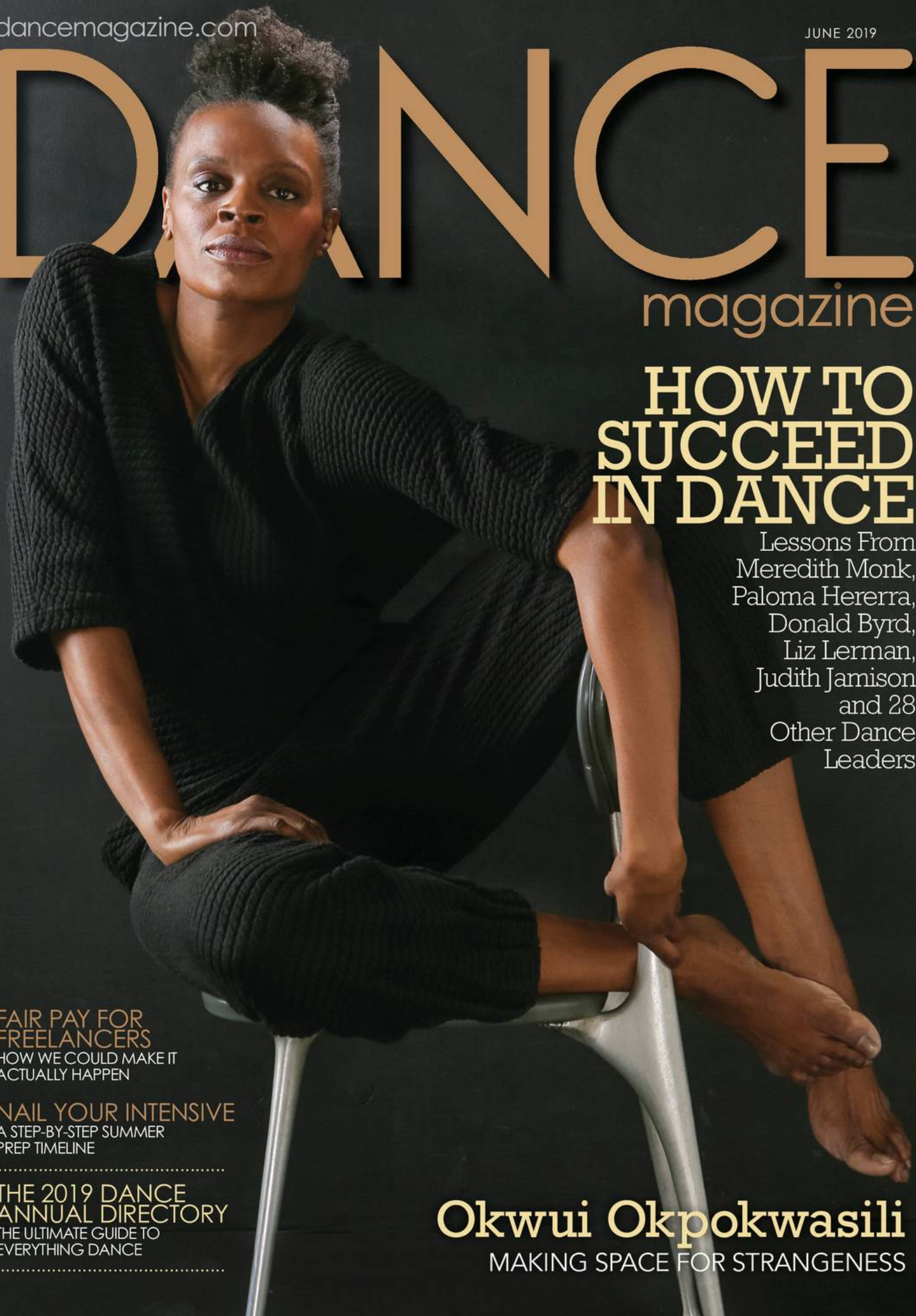

HOW TO SUCCEED IN DANCE

Lessons From Meredith Monk, Paloma Herrera, Donald Byrd, Liz Lerman, Judith Jamison and 28 Other Dance Leaders

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A STEP-BY-STEP SUMMER PREP TIMELINE

THE 2019 DANCE ANNUAL DIRECTORY

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO EVERYTHING DANCE

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."

my tongue is a blade

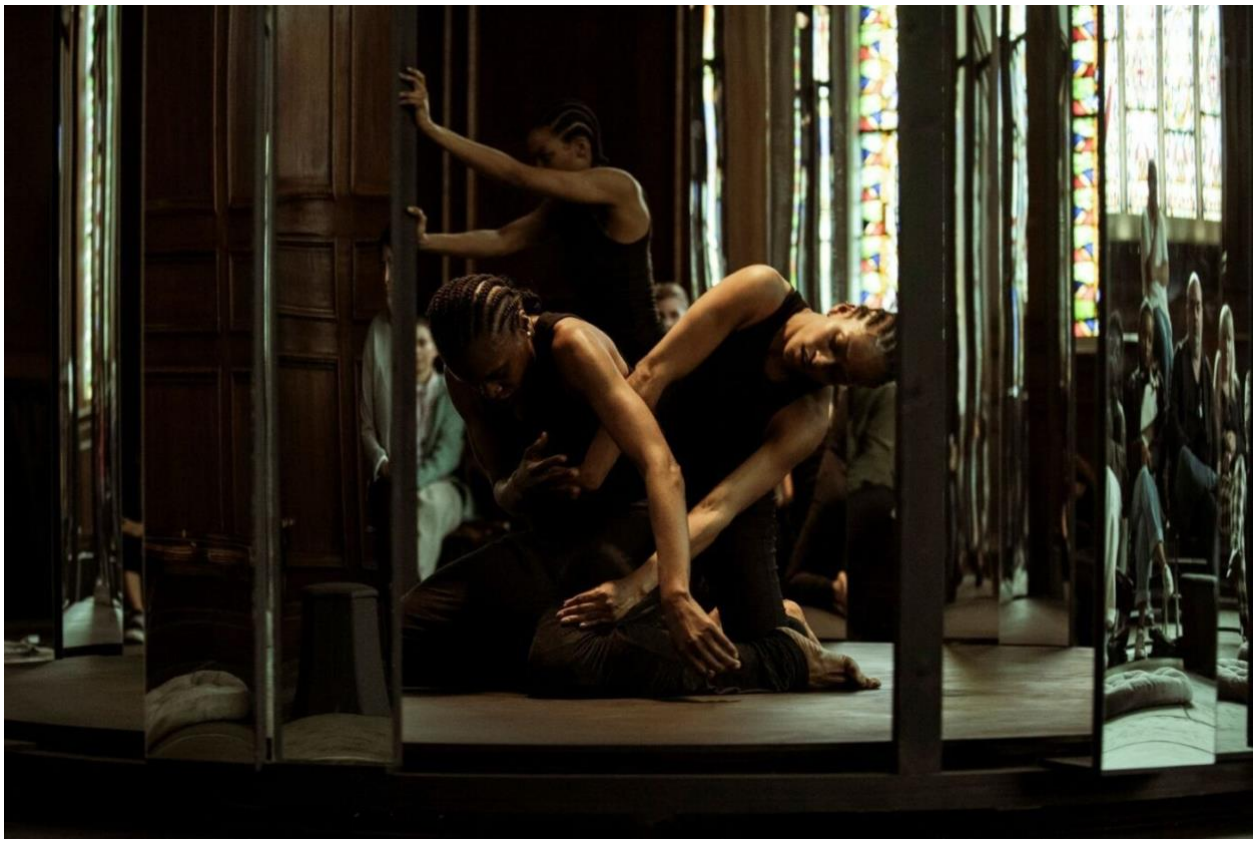
Photo by Luca Truffarelli

BOMB

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born by Amit Noy

A durational performance engages with memory and relation in mirrored, sonically rich environs.

FEBRUARY 20, 2026



Performance still from Sweat Variant, my tongue is a blade, 2025. Photo by Luca Truffarelli.

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born create glimmeringly uncategorizable artworks under the moniker Sweat Variant. Dance or theater? Performance or fugitive architecture? Look to the name and see what it tells you: first, they wring the body to induce a liquid transformation. Then, they run from the non-variable, alive within the process of change. Okpokwasili organizes blood, sinew, diaphragm, and muscle into devastating constellations. Born, who designs the visual and aural worlds of Sweat Variant, vibrates keenly between the nascent and the ancient, catapulting us into a wholly singular landscape. We met online to talk about their most recent work, my tongue is a blade, premiered in June 2025 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and most recently presented at Art Basel Qatar. As part of PS21's new festival, The Dark, my tongue is a blade will have its North American premiere this weekend.

Amit Noy: When you go to the theater, there's usually a clear code of viewership, and you're not necessarily presented with a choice: you'll sit there as something happens, and when the artist decides that it's over, you'll

leave. With my tongue is a blade, you're implicating the audience, and the question of their agency, in a thicker way. Do you expect audience members to be there for the whole performance?

Peter Born: We were just at the first-ever Art Basel Qatar. my tongue is a blade was one of the little side shows there, and the art gallerist crowd is definitely a vibe. They're mainly there to buy their artwork, and we were in a little room off to the side. Maybe they stumbled in there and went, what's going on? Their first impulse was usually to pull out their phone. Five minutes before we're supposed to start, somebody came in to tell us, oh, this very important person is going to be a little bit late. Can you wait half an hour for them? No! It's a three-hour durational event—even if you arrive in the middle, you're still going to get it. We've tried to make the seating egalitarian, so nobody feels awkward about leaving. You don't have to walk out in front of everybody; you can sneak out the back.

Performance still from Sweat Variant, my tongue is a blade, 2025. Photo by Luca Truffarelli.

Okwui Okpokwasili: It's designed it so that you can have the experience that you need in the moment. The experience that you choose. Sometimes people stay for the entire time. Obviously we, the performers, are there for the three hours. It's really important that we hold the thread of attention. The practice is about memory and the way it haunts the body. We're moving from solos to duets and asking, How do you stay haunted by the person just here, now gone? We try to open up portals of memory—ways to become mysterious to yourself. Ways to be inhabited by something other. In my tongue is a blade we begin with a kind of cry or wail, basically a song that moves through language, into a wail, and back into song. This wailsong is the thread that carries us through, and we try to make space for people to be inside that landscape in any way they choose. There's nothing required of them other than their attention, for as long as they can manage it. We live in a time where our attention is a valuable commodity that different corporations and organizations are fighting to control. This piece is a definite, deep departure from that. I am not interested in any more attention than you're willing to give.

AN: You're being witnessed inside a particular physical structure, a kind of rotating vessel.

OO: We're working inside a circular structure of plexiglass mirrors that is constantly shifting because one of us is always turning it. The people watching see themselves reflected back as they get these glimpses of us inside. It's like the world turning.

"We're interested in ruptures that remain unshut, openings that don't suture cleanly. They transform you and render you different."
— Okwui Okpokwasili

PB: It's always true, even of a well-made play or a musical, that the work is a confluence of events. There's sound, there's light, there's movement, and then the experience itself is created by the viewer. They're the ones who go, These pieces either come together and adhere or they don't. Most pieces adhere so cleanly, you don't even question it. Like, Of course that's how West Side Story should sound.

AN: Often adherence is even the primary pursuit.

PB: Okwui and I have a looser relationship to the confluence of things. We bring together sounds or movements or spatial experiences that people aren't immediately able to categorize. You might not know where you are, and you might not know how to act. We let the work live in the outside. Rather than saying, Do you get it?, we say, Here's the thing; What can you get out of it?

Performance still from Sweat Variant, my tongue is a blade, 2025. Photo by Luca Truffarelli.

AN: You ask the viewer to locate themselves while the ground shifts under their feet. At the same time, part of what I love in your work is that you also insist on and commit to things that are highly located. In adaku, part 1: the road opens (2023) or Bronx Gothic (2014) there are materials you could call highly located or situational, like certain texts and flirtations with narrative. Part of what I love about your work is that you might not be telling us exactly where we are, but we are somewhere, and that somewhere has meaning.

OO: I always begin with text, and I'm always trying to figure out how to have my writing practice be in a dynamic relationship to my movement practice. I'm a lover of stories, you know what I mean? But I hold on to them loosely. Peter also has a writing practice as well as a sonic practice and a design practice. Sometimes, our practices are able to run together in conjunction; sometimes, they collapse as we're trying to figure out where they can meet. We bounce off of each other, arguing and agreeing. We're life partners and performance collaborators, so we're constantly navigating and interested by difference and collision. It's not always neatly coherent. Actually, it rarely is.

AN: I've often felt deeply marked by your ability to make me feel, through your physical practice, the force of ongoingness. You're able to swim inside motions or actions that track the breathlessness of inexorability, as with the shaking at the beginning of Bronx Gothic, or the circular group processional in adaku, part 1. I'm curious, when you stick with something and give it that kind of time and space compositionally, do you also see that as a design choice?

OO: With adaku, part 1, we were thinking about the community pulse through the terms of pre-colonial Igbo culture; specifically, the ways the community might come together when there's a major argument. There weren't kings and queens, and there was an understanding that if you had something to offer, you could speak regardless of who you were. That framework, to me, is a proto-democratic structure. What is an agreement around how to disagree? The processional pulse came out of that, but over the course of the piece, the pulse is broken because as much as I might idealize this perfect prototype for democracy, things are never that clean or clear. I'm interested in how we keep going until we can't. How then do we manage, reorganize, or reorient around a break or rupture?

Performance still from Sweat Variant, my tongue is a blade, 2025. Photo by Luca Truffarelli.

PB: An example of that in my tongue is a blade is the wailsong. You're delving into a moment where you're going to cry and scream, but then it might ease back into a song. It goes back and forth. I think this kind of energy

exists across many of the things we've done. Whether you're talking about the shaking or the wailsong, the practice is to go until you reach the break. The question is not whether we will break, but how we do so.

OO: With the wailsong, I'm trying to reach into the DNA in my lineage, the DNA of certain kinds of rupture and pain, and allow it to move through me. Fred Moten talks about Frederick Douglass and the moment where he recognizes his own subjectivity within the cry of Aunt Hester, tracing the lineage of Black improvisational song and sound to that moment. He's talking about the line from cry to song to speech. Is there a way to trace the lineage of that cry in each of us, which exists alongside this moment of weeping and grief, whether in Gaza or Minneapolis or the ongoing pain and colonial struggles in Africa and South America? A scream that goes from the core of the Earth's crust right through the heavens? If you open that space, how do you return? We're interested in ruptures that remain unshut, openings that don't suture cleanly. They transform you and render you different. I don't know that I can even articulate how. I guess I need it for myself, and I try to bring people into the room who also need it. I'm thankful that Peter needs it too. Through his sonic practice, Peter creates these landscapes—mountains, valleys, oceans, rivers—and I can just get lost in them and through them, in an expansive way. I feel lucky that he understands that I want to go somewhere. I want to break and reform around the sound.

my tongue is a blade receives its North American premiere on February 21 and 22 Hudson Hall in New York.

Amit Noy is a dancer, choreographer, and writer. Raised in Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand, he now lives and works in Marseille, France.

DANCE ART JOURNAL
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SWEAT VARIANT'S MY TONGUE IS A BLADE

Photo by Steven Taylor

Words by Amelia Langas.

I planned on getting to the performance right when it began, but after a train delay at Penn Station, I arrived towards the end of my slotted entrance time, about fifty minutes into Sweat Variant's three-hour durational piece my tongue is a blade. The night before, a friend had excitedly told me about the performance duo's let slip, hold sway, presented in 2025 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, leaving me eager for what was in store. "I planned on only staying an hour, but ended up staying the whole time," he said. "I was captivated." After conquering the precursory three-hour trek, delays and all, from my Brooklyn apartment to Hudson, New York, I finally entered the Hudson Opera House where my tongue is a blade was making its U.S. premiere as part of PS21's The Dark festival, a showcase of contemporary art performances and installations.

Choreographer, performer, and writer Okwui Okpokwasili and director, composer, and designer Peter Born comprise the artist duo known as **Sweat Variant**. Known for creating performances that sensitively blend dance, theater, and sculpture without ever confining themselves to a singular box, Sweat Variant previously presented ***my tongue is a blade*** in June 2025 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and at Art Basel Qatar. Over the course of those three hours in Hudson, four performers including Okpokwasili restrained, supported, nuzzled, and ricocheted off each other, ebbing and flowing between duets and solos exploring memory and attention.

Photo by Steven Taylor

Although there was a proscenium stage in the opera house, it was eschewed for this performance. Instead, the performers contained their movements to a circular

platform in the center of the room elevated an inch or so off the ground and the immediate space around it. But perhaps the most visually scintillating part of the environment was the perpetually rotating structure of intermittently spaced double-sided mirrors surrounding the platform, kept in motion by one or another of the performers. The structure literally glimmered, casting unchoreographed moments of light around the room, interrupting the dancers' bodies as they moved within its confines and reflecting the audience's own faces. I caught startling glimpses of myself in the mirrors as the structure spun.

This decided unification of audience and performer, a threshold crossed, evoked a shared intimacy: as the audience witnessed the performers, so too did the performers attend to the audience, at times even making direct eye contact. As audience members, we took part in this ritual of relation, doffing our shoes before entering the performance space and sitting on benches, chairs, and child-sized stools arranged around the mirror structure. Some also stood while others, myself included, opted to sit on the floor. You were never confined to a specific seat and could come and go as you pleased for the duration of the piece. Once I sat down though, I only moved to change seating positions, entranced by the urgency and sincerity of the dancers' movements, how they fell into each other in duets and held the memory of other bodies in solos. Maybe I was also slightly hypnotised by the rotating mirrors. While there was a physical boundary of space between the performers and the audience, I felt pulled into their world as though following a path of centripetal force.

Okpokwasili's movement and composition converged with Born's sonic and set designs to create a ritual-like experience of collective effervescence—what sociologist Émile Durkheim called "a sort of electricity" generated when a group of individuals comes together to perform a religious ritual and that closeness "launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation." Through collaborative and individual movement languages rooted in relation to each other and the mirror space, Okpokwasili and fellow performers Bria Bacon, Kris Lee, and AJ Wilmore built a landscape of mutual support, recognition, and departing, tapping into the ephemerality of memory and relationships. As the performance came to a close, the dancers left the space one by one until only Wilmore remained. They gave the mirror structure one last running push, then exited. Gradually, the structure came to rest and I was left staring at myself in one of the mirrors.

Exiting the opera house, I felt as if coming out of a trance where I'd glimpsed a space beyond the corporeal and approaching the spiritual, a realm where the boundaries of both my person and my psyche had broken and conflated with those of everyone else in the room. I remembered something mysterious and ancient, awoken by that collective effervescence. My friend who had accompanied me to the performance remarked breathlessly, eyes wide, "They need a comedown room after that." And I understood.

let slip, hold sway

Photo by Maria Baranova

fjord

Looking Back to See Forward

I step off the elevator onto the 5th floor of the Whitney Museum and I am awed by the spectacle, vastness, and ground shifting power of the “Edges of Ailey” exhibition. This tribute to Alvin Ailey and his universe—past, present, and future—not only lifts up its larger-than-life subject but it also, like a great ocean wave, raises up and carries forward everything in its wake. I daresay “Edges of Ailey” not only illuminates the importance of Alvin Ailey as a Black American artist, it also does this for modern dance. The exhibition shows modern dance to be a meaningful, expressive, and influential art form—giving it much greater public visibility than what is afforded by the performance hall, public television, or other museum shows.

Performance

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born: “Let Slip, Hold Sway”

Place

Whitney Museum, New York, NY, February 6, 2025

Words

Karen Greenspan

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born's “Let Slip, Hold Sway.” Photograph by Maria Baranova

Under the inspired and big-thinking curation of senior curator Adrienne Edwards, the Whitney dedicated its 18,000 square-foot fifth-floor galleries to presenting Alvin Ailey's story. This grand celebration of black resilience, accomplishment, and excellence—through the context of black dancing bodies—goes beyond the immense city block-long space and into the incalculable realm of performance. In the museum's third floor theater, the exhibition offered over ninety live performances including newly commissioned works by other creators. The visionary programming truly carries forward the Ailey ethos of building a platform for other Black modern dancers and choreographers and included commissions by: Ronald K. Brown, Trajal Harrell, Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon and Kevin Beasley, Sarah Michelson, Will Rawls, Matthew Rushing, Yusha-Marie Sorzano, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Okwui Okpokwasili in collaboration with Peter Born. The diversity of artistic voices attests as Adrienne Edwards put it, "to Ailey's profound presence—whether as influence, imprint, or shadow—in contemporary dance."

During the final week of this almost five-month exhibition, Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born are presenting their work titled "Let Slip, Hold Sway." Okpokwasili is a Brooklyn-based, multidisciplinary artist of Nigerian Igbo descent. She creates work in collaboration with her partner in life and art, Peter Born, under the auspices of their company, Sweat Variant. Just as Ailey saw collaboration as key to developing creative potential, Sweat Variant (from the website) "describes a collaborative practice to make challenging and rigorous work at the intersection of dance, theater, and visual art." As described in the performance announcement, "'Let Slip, Hold Sway'" continues ongoing research into the entanglement between ancestors and the role of ritual using the aesthetics of experimentation and unexpected collaborations." It contributes to the growing constellation of material for their *adaku trilogy*("adaku: part 1" premiered in 2023).

I walk into the dark theater space to behold a dance already in process, or more precisely—a ritual in process…a process in process. Adjusting to the darkness, I take a seat on one of the benches arranged along with some seat cushions around the central performance space. On a circle of red flooring about ten feet in diameter, Okpokwasili is standing, her feet in motion but maintaining their contact with the ground, her torso undulating, and her arms and hands exploring the air in a somatic sensing of the kinesthetic field she inhabits. The visuals, constructed by Born, include two large metal rings (slightly larger than the circle on the floor), anchored to the dance ground that angle diagonally upward. Suspended above the dancer, is a smaller disc, upon which projections of moving water play across its underside. The electronic score of insistent rhythmic percussion (also by Born) charges the environment with energy as the dancer lifts her face with an expression of joy and wonder.

Okpokwasili raises an arm and points a finger upward. At this gesture, we become aware of a chorus of three other dancers (Bria Bacon, Kris Lee, and Katrina Reid) who rise to their feet from low stools surrounding the central space. Their faces are hidden beneath shamanic headdresses made of long strands of thick red coral beads that resemble plaited hair—ingenius constructions that immediately connect to African hair culture and shamanic practices that bridge the physical and spiritual realms. Everyone is wearing dark, sheer, tulle athletic wear fabricated by James Gibbel adorned with embroidered floral patterns, glittery sequins, and recognizable Adidas stripes on the side seams.

The masked dancers move around the circle like ghostly figures and sink back down into the periphery. One figure remains standing; she picks up one of several small lanterns strewn about the floor and carries it inside her headdress to light her path. Placing it down on the floor, she removes her headdress and steps through the metal hoops—literally crossing into another sphere of experience. Upon entering the inner circle, she matches her energy and movement quality to that of Okpokwasili. They engage in a movement conversation—rhythmic, with touch and implied touch, interweaving body parts, and resting on and supporting one another. The Beaded Ones (as those wearing headdresses are called) begin a rhythmic synchrony of swaying and rocking that builds energy as the beads of the headdresses collide against each other making an insistent rattling sound. The dance crescendos as the two central bodies vibrate frenetically in ever shifting, connecting positions. At this moment, a projection of tiny red dots of light intensifies over the central dancers as well as on the small disc overhead. Some even trickle onto a portion of the audience. Under the red lighting, the two dancing bodies are no longer discernible as separate. They have merged into one—in a radical, futuristic vision of nonduality.

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born's "Let Slip, Hold Sway." Photograph by Maria Baranova

As the red sparkles dissolve, the quality of the dancers' movements changes. The movement becomes combative. With a series of quickening punches and blocking moves, Okwui is pushed out of the center as the second dancer continues vigorously thrashing at the air. Okwui crawls to her beaded headdress, places it on her head, and takes her place on a low stool. Now the second dancer claims the circle with a series of loose hipped dance steps. Her arms and torso quickly assume the quality of the steps. Then, as if possessed by an external force, her entire being takes off into speedy, staccato movements that evolve into a rapid-fire, full body vibration.

Like midwives coaching a birth, the Beaded Ones begin their swaying with audible breathing and panting, the headdress beads clicking. They rise and one circles the inner sanctum as the others settle into the ground—either seated or lying down in repose—like ancient banyan tree roots merging with the earth. The third dancer, who is circling, repeats the actions of entering the ritual space: taking a lantern under her headdress, walking to a place of entrance, putting down the light. She crouches to the ground and shakes off her headdress. Okwui, who is seated on a stool as a Beaded One, begins a soothing chant, which is joined in time by the others.

The third dancer enters and matches the now quieted quality of the second dancer. Their bodies rub against each other and then separate to form complimentary shapes around each other. Exploring an isolated twisting motion, one body leans upon the support of the other. They continue this while changing positions of contact and exchanging roles of reliance and support. Again, the splash of red lights illuminates this field of heightened interconnection. In an instant the dynamic changes and the bodies begin to thrust themselves against each other and away from each other, arms flailing. As the lights disappear, the aggressive energy peters out, and the third dancer supports and cradles the second dancer, who is now utterly spent, until she falls out of the dance ground in a puddle of exhaustion.

The third dancer commences her dance to a wash of pulsing chords. On cue, the Beaded Ones sway. One paces the perimeter of the circle as the central dancer rotates her body with the inside of her wrists locked together above her head. She continues revolving as her joined wrists shift behind her head. Imperceptibly, the physical movements begin to suggest something nefarious. Twisting and resisting against her seemingly bound wrists, standing on a single spot under the projections of moving water directly above, the dancer, to my mind, looks to be recalling the trauma of a slave struggling against her bonds in the hold of a ship.

After another period of swaying and rocking, the fourth dancer removes her headpiece to enter the central space. She immediately surrounds the central dancer with her arms, her head, and her gaze as if to hold her. They begin undulating together like seaweed, intertwining their arms and hands, then rotating toward and away from each other. Coaxed on by the sound and motion of the swaying chorus, the two dancers rise and descend, their bodies leaning against each other. Then, vibrating together, the two remain connected, but without the touch of hands or arms. The full complex of electronic sound diminishes to a simple heartbeat and the constellation of red lights appears. In this portal of co-emergence, time seems to slow down to a time beyond time—measured only by human hearts beating in elemental connection.

The third dancer crawls out of the circle and leaves the fourth dancer twitching on her hands and knees. Stretching upward and then back down, she pokes at the air with one arm in jagged motions like a birdling prodding its way out of its shell. And so, it continues for three hours—audience members have been instructed to leave and enter as they please. The work, which Okpokwasili and Born have dubbed a "durational practice" is, in my opinion, a contemporary ritual—a powerful embodied practice of connection, recollection, grieving, healing, and transformation─transformative for the viewer as well as the doer. Dance, used in this way, has been all but lost in our modern world of capital and concepts. Perhaps with the ancestral wisdom of "looking back to see forward" and Sweat Variant's fearless experimentation, we can find our way back and retrieve it.

Karen Greenspan

Karen Greenspan is a New York City-based dance journalist and frequent contributor to *Natural History Magazine*, Dance Tabs, *Ballet Review,* and *Tricycle* among other publications. She is also the author of *Footfalls from the Land of Happiness: A Journey into the Dances of Bhutan*, published in 2019.

DANCE magazine

Okwui Okpokwasili (center) with Samita Sinha and mayfield brooks in *adaku, part 1: the road opens*.
Photo by Tony Turner, courtesy Okpokwasili.

Okwui Okpokwasili On Her New Work for the "Edges of Ailey" Exhibition, *Let Slip, Hold Sway*

Lauren Wingenroth

February 5, 2025

When the Whitney Museum asked choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili to make a piece for its "Edges of Ailey" exhibition, she wasn't sure what her place was within the legacy of Alvin Ailey. Her work is experimental, highly theatrical, and bears little resemblance to the seminal choreographer's. But as she dug through Ailey's vast archives, discovering his connections to choreographers like Anna Halprin and Ralph Lemon and his lesser-known dance works and short stories, "I realized, I actually am in the lineage of that work," she says.

Okpokwasili won't say much about the specifics of *Let Slip, Hold Sway*, which will premiere on February 6 as part of the exhibition, and which she's making with her partner in life and art, Peter Born, under the auspices of their company, Sweat Variant. But the research process she describes seems to align with the exhibition itself, which aims to reveal the peripheries of Ailey's life and work. The commission comes at a busy time for Okpokwasili, who with Sweat Variant recently launched two programs—the Artists Supporting Artists Program and the

Threading residency—intended to support fellow artists. And if you watched the hit Marvel television show "Agatha All Along," you may have spotted Okpokwasili, who briefly appeared as the witch Vertigo.

Did the Whitney approach you about participating in "Edges of Ailey"?

I've known Adrienne Edwards [the exhibition's curator] for a while now, from when she was with Performa. So they did ask me, because it's called "*Edges* of Ailey," right? So there are all these parts of his practice, his relationships, that we don't know. I come from a theater movement practice that's really outside of contemporary dance. So I was kind of like, "What am I going to do here?" I know that he spent some time with Anna Halprin. And then I learned that he gave Bill T. Jones his first commission, and I think he gave Ralph Lemon his first commission. I was really compelled by the extent of his understanding of the whole world of dance; that he kept connected to what choreographers were exploring outside of these institutions.

It sounds like you were, in the spirit of the exhibition, discovering the edges of Ailey.

I had no idea. I'm recognizing how I am entangled in this legacy. What we're doing is not a direct echo of Ailey. But I feel that it's connected, and I'm held in the space that he was cultivating.

Okwui Okpokwasili in a still from *before the whisper becomes the word*. Photo by Peter Born, courtesy Okpokwasili.

You're launching two artist support programs. What's the intention behind those?

I feel like my work has always been held by this community of performers, this larger ecosystem. We're trying to be really clear about the fact that without this ecosystem, we don't exist. So what can we do to sustain this ecosystem? With the generosity of the Mellon Foundation, we have some funding, so we've been able to think about other artists that we know and love, and some artists that we don't know, that we can give a little something to help them realize their work. We had an inaugural residency where, when we're away over the summer, we give some space in our house for someone to stay and use our studio. Because a lot of people, especially in the wake of the COVID pandemic, had to move out of New York City. So, how do we also use some

of the resources that we have that we may not have imagined as a resource? But all of these are still seedlings—we still have to build a way for them to be sustained over the long term, because we know that cultural funding is shifting so much. It's a useful challenge to think about: What do you want to fight to hold on to?

Tell me about your experience being on "Agatha All Along."

It was fun. It's always great to be a part of a larger cultural creative act that's really feminist. Who doesn't want to be a witch, if you want to be an empowered woman? That's the icon. I haven't watched the whole thing, but all of the ways it's trying to get these women to get back to some sort of core power that they hold in themselves—and that can never be taken from them—is such a beautiful thing. It's a kind of fantasy that I want to be with, no matter how much damage they do to each other.

adaku, part 1: the road opens

Photo by Tony Turner

the village VOICE

Review: ‘adaku, part 1: the road opens’ Brings Africa to the Stage at BAM’s Next Wave Festival

Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born’s collaboration blends ancient ritual and contemporary crisis.

By Elizabeth Zimmer

November 30, 2023

Performers in “adaku, part 1: the road opens.” Tony Turner

It is the coldest night of the year so far; Brooklyn is wracked with piercing winds, and as curtain time approaches, a crowd padded in layers of down presses toward the entrance of the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Fishman Space. Inside the theater — a “black box” with seating on three sides — it is Africa. The first performance of “adaku, part 1: the road opens” has already begun. Described in press materials as exploring “the fraught relationship between ancestors, future generations, and the role of ritual,” the 75-minute show grapples with all of these, as well as the ominous thrum of climate change, of the disasters looming ahead that press hardest on the consciousness of the young.

A collaboration among writer-performer Okwui Okpokwasili, director-designer Peter Born, and their cast and crew, “adaku” leaves us in the dark for a very long time, while a clump composed of seven people, barefoot, wearing simple sleeveless tops and gorgeous, layered, petal-like split skirts (by James Gibbel) moves around the edge of a circle inscribed in white on the dark floor. Their feet pound in unison, a complex rhythm, taking the dancers forward and rearranging their positions in the cluster. Most of them have very dark skin; it’s difficult to discern their age or gender, but we hear them chanting and notice flute and percussion in Born’s sound score. (The cast includes Okpokwasili, a head taller than the others and bone-thin, and Audrey Hailes, AJ Wilmore, mayfield brooks, McKenzie Frye, Stacy Lynn Smith, and Samita Sinha.)

We are surrounded by a rumbling sound. Is this the apocalypse?

A pair of what look like black stools in the middle of the circle slowly rise into the air and are revealed to be down-spot lamps. A couple of performers break out of the group to build and manipulate what appears to be fire. A tall oblique beam at the back of the space lights up via a long fluorescent tube; a red oval on one side glows, serving as a screen for the projection of waves. The high back wall of the space is covered with rumpled silver foil, perhaps a representation of water, looming alongside the little settlement. The dancers slow their stamping and sing together in a kind of petitioning chorus, asking for clarity, asking the way on a journey. They listen as the tall one (Okpokwasili as Oga Madam, a mother figure who is clearly in crisis) details a nightmare.

First she rallies her squad, in a call-and-response pattern. She speaks and she sings: “When I opened my eyes, I couldn’t move. I was bound in a shroud, soaked and bloody and cold. I started fighting my way out of it and this shroud unraveled, becoming a river of blood, dragging me into the darkness of the bush. And as my eyes started to adjust, I looked down. What I was on, was not sand, was not soil, it was the sharp edges of broken bones. And these bones were the bones of children.”

Her nightmare ramifies; she attributes her mental distress to a carved figure, a fertility god she’s commissioned from a nearby artisan: “Carve for me a figure that can hold my gratitude for all of the seeds that I will plant and the fruit I will harvest!” Instead, she claims, she has been cursed.

Oga Madam’s daughter is charged with retrieving the figure, which has been returned to its maker. The two elders throw accusations at each other while the younger woman sets about solving the problem, learning to make new “carvings that open the road.” She journeys to “Aunty,” the carver, to ask that the troublesome sculpture be destroyed. Psychology and magic, art and compassion mingle in their conversations; in addition to all of her other skills, the MacArthur-winning Okpokwasili is a formidable analyst of the human condition.

Meanwhile, the silver paper on the wall surges down and forward until it covers the whole space, representing water that breaks loose and floods the entire community, swallowing the intrepid, diplomatic daughter. The women (if that is what they are — the narrative implies that even in this ancient African society people might alter their gender and orientation, and this theater piece leans into a possible future) engage in a ritual of mourning, keening and screaming. We are surrounded by a deep, rumbling sound. Is this the apocalypse?

Listen to these songs, absorb these rhythms. Okpokwasili (the Bronx-born child of immigrants from Nigeria) and her ensemble are the next generation, and they will lead us old white fossils — who’ve been flailing in the public space for half a century — into the peril and promise of the unfolding millennium. ❖

adaku, part 1: the road opens
BAM Next Wave Festival
BAM Fisher, 321 Ashland Place, Brooklyn
Through December 2

GAGOSIAN

THE ROAD OPENS

IN CONVERSATION WITH OKWUI OKPOKWASILI

Multidisciplinary artist Okwui Okpokwasili's new work *adaku, part 1: the road opens* is a continuation of her efforts to bring West African forms of dance, poetry, song, and theater into a contemporary framework. Catching up with Okpokwasili after the work's premiere in Los Angeles this past spring, Rennie McDougall traces *adaku*'s artistic lineages ahead of its New York debut in the fall.

When the audience entered LA's REDCAT theater for the opening night of Okwui Okpokwasili's *adaku, part 1: the road opens*, Okpokwasili and her collaborators were already at work. In close formation, the seven performers stomped to a consistent rhythm, treaded strongly in the earth, chanting together about ancestry, lineage, movement, and a gateway. The collective—a "coven of witches," as Okpokwasili later described them—moved steadily along a circular path marked on the stage. They continued this marking of space for some time without relenting their rhythm, maintaining a pulse, driving the work forward. From this engine emerged three characters: a matriarch leader extolling the importance of family lineage and futurity; an artist whose enigmatic carvings revealed unwanted truths to the community; and the matriarch's daughter, a protegée of the artist's. The story that unfolded over the sixty-minute performance centered on the interpretation of the artist's work and its implications for the culture, its revelations about history and trauma, whether people can bear to face those truths, and a final devastation inflicted on the community. But the engine was always driving onward, supporting the characters' warring motivations. The circling chorus, responding to calls from the actors in unison, continued to carve out the circle, to "open the road."

What is this road? A road to where? Between what—life and death? Past and future? History and imagination? Reality and dream? Like the artist with her carvings, Okpokwasili suggests it all and leaves it to the observer to see what they see. "I'm not a historian," she told me the day after the performance. "I'm just reaching back to see forward."

But that was not where our conversation started. It began with the HBO show *Succession*, the final episode of which was about to premiere, and the irredeemability of America's wealthiest class. It moved on to her admiration for Harriet Walter's performance as Caroline Collingwood; then to Americans' reverence for British accents, and to the complicated deference to British monarchy; to Olivia Colman playing Queen Elizabeth II in Netflix's *The Crown*, listening to horse-racing statistics through an earpiece to keep her expressive face placid; to Meghan Markle, and how anyone could feign surprise when learning that the royal institution harbored racist sentiments; to Tim Scott, the Black Republican senator from South Carolina, and his denial that Black people still face oppression in America; and finally to the

Opening spread:
Okwui Okpokwasili, *adaku, part 1: the road opens*, 2023, performance. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2023. Pictured: Samita Sinha, mayfield brooks, Okwui Okpokwasili, McKenzie Frye, and Stacy Lynn Smith.

Opposite:
Okwui Okpokwasili, *adaku, part 1: the road opens*, 2023, performance. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2023. Pictured: Audrey Hailes.

Photos: Lauren Miller

idea of the narrative pillars that dominate history, and how the powers that be fight to keep such pillars erect. "What I love about the younger generations is how slippery they are." Okpokwasili said. "That's the only way we're going to get it. We gotta really undo all of the things that anchor us to some sense of self that is immutable."

The world Okpokwasili has conjured in *adaku, part 1* is slippery—about truth, about form, about time. "I'm really concerned with narratives and with recovering narratives." Okpokwasili said, "but I also don't feel any kind of fealty to a truth." The language and values of the culture Okpokwasili has invented gesture toward something ancient. Okpokwasili relates to this reaching back into history both factually and imaginatively. Her research into precolonial Nigerian cultures provided her with freeing alternatives to the colonial narratives she'd absorbed as a child. "I felt like I was only understanding [African history] in the context of colonialism and missions and religion," she said. "I've always thought, 'What's before that?'" The first text that expanded her knowledge of precolonial Nigerian history was Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). "That's a kind of foundational text for me," she said. "It opened up that sense of there was a 'before' before."

adaku, part 1 draws from Okpokwasili's continued research into those precolonial histories, which are so often erased or obscured by colonial assumptions. "Especially in southern Nigeria, [some of] the Igbo people," she said. "The British called that area kind of chaotic and feminine—feminine because there was no titular head that they could go to and establish power through the means of indirect rule." The social and political governing systems that colonists could not or would not acknowledge opened up possibilities for Okpokwasili as she imagined her own collective, one that could connect to both past and future. "It was so important for me to understand how complex and heterogeneous these communities were, or the fact that a woman could become a son and then marry a wife and have children in her name."

While the work reaches back to a precolonial past, the stage design, by Peter Born (who also directed and composed the sound design), evokes futurity. A large disc of orange plexiglass hung from the ceiling, with projected onto it a video of a turbulent ocean. The orange disc appeared like a giant fireball, a sun or planet. Vast sheets of Mylar draped the stage's backdrop and at one point were pulled forward by the cast, the silvery fabric cresting and rustling like a metallic wave. These elements dislodged the world of *adaku* from any fixed relationship to historical time and place. Okpokwasili is invested in creating a new time, one where her coven can imagine and create their own liberation from history.

"What does that mean, to make a journey from one place to another, and what does it take to open up some memory?," Okpokwasili asked. "I'm a believer just in the power of duration. You do it, you do it, and you're not going to be the same as when you started." One can see that between these six performers something transformative takes place. There is a sense of ownership of their own role, and through that ownership each performer carries and supports the entire performance. This is a quality that Okpokwasili intentionally cultivates. "I want to bring other people—who are authors and artists with their own practices—to bring them into the space and bring that particular quality that comes from people who anchor their own work or have their own practices to ask questions or make space for exploration," she said. On this point, though, about decentralizing an author and favoring collective creation, Okpokwasili wavered. She ultimately wants to claim responsibility for the story she is telling—to be the work's author. "Maybe I have to just realize that I'm not the person that I imagined myself to be and I should just be the person I am, which is somebody who does want to make certain narratives," she said.

Okpokwasili has drawn from her own personal stories in earlier works; her experiences growing up in the Bronx as the daughter of Nigerian parents laid the groundwork for her solo show *Bronx Gothic* (2015). In *adaku, part 1*, the relationship to personal storytelling becomes more ambiguous. The characters are entirely of Okpokwasili's invention: a community of unspecified West African origin in an unspecified time. Rather than drawing from any specific personal narrative, however, it is her intimately personal relationship to the act of creation itself—the questions of artmaking, history, and cultural memory—that compels *adaku, part 1*. Although Okpokwasili plays the role of the matriarch, she connects deeply with the character of the artist, whose vision startles, frightens, and even delivers devastation to those who see it. "I'm kind of on her side," she said.

To me, the word "interdisciplinary" feels inadequate in describing Okpokwasili's theater. She does combine performance modes—song, theater, call-and-response, design, dance (although she avoids that particular word: "I'm doing everything to avoid calling it dance")—but there is no sense that she viewed these different disciplines separately from one another before bringing them together. As much as *adaku* evokes Nigerian griot storytelling traditions, it also conjures Greek tragedy, an obsession of Okpokwasili's. "It's almost old fashioned," she said of the impulse in theater to want to tell the audience a story. That storytelling impulse sits alongside an older impulse to make, to craft, to generate—the act of making art a kind of engine that activates live in front of an audience to create a vibrational exchange, one that perhaps resonates more gutturally than the beats of a narrative. It is elemental theater, where song and dance and storytelling mutually support each other, all birthed from the same impulse that Okpokwasili describes as the work's conception: the pulse, the vibration.

"We're always trying to, in some way—and I'll give Peter credit for this—the two of us are always trying to sculpt a gestural language from feeling," she said. "We're always trying to figure out: how do we make a whole world?" And how does one make a world? Okpokwasili reaches back to see forward, as far back as the beginning of the universe. "Some people say the universe began with a fucking vibration," she said. "We're trying to make a world. A universe. It's not a big thing. It's just a small thing. It's a tiny, tiny idea." Elemental as its origins may be, Okpokwasili's universe, her alternative to the fixity of history, is a means to opening up new imaginative futures. "This is in the service of this particular world of women, femme folks, queer folks," she said. "There's an elemental thing we're doing together and making. It's some kind of elemental labor that we are charged with."

By Rennie McDougall

SITTING ON A MAN'S HEAD

Photo by Peter Born

The New York Times

Okwui Okpokwasili Wants You to Slow Down and Walk With Her.

At Danspace Project, Ms. Okpokwasili invites you into her work. Listen. Answer a question. Maybe sing a bit

February 21, 2020

By Brian Seibert

We are walking together, so slowly that it might take 45 minutes to cross the small room. Our bodies are close, but as in a packed subway car, we don't make eye contact. We listen. We hear breath, moans, laughter. These all come from us, as do more mysteriously layers of words and song that rise up and sink, perhaps to resurface later. For long stretches, we walk in silence.

This is all highly unusual for me. I'm visiting a rehearsal as a journalist, and in such situations, I normally behave like an audience member, not a participant. But what is being rehearsed, "Sitting on a Man's Head," isn't really for an audience.

Guests, however, are invited. And if you attend Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church on a Friday night during the four weeks of "Platform 2020: Utterances From the Chorus" (Feb. 22-March 21), you have the option of remaining outside the enclosed space where "Sitting on a Man's Head" continues for four hours. You could just listen without seeing.

Or you can ponder the question "What do you carry that carries you?" And if you write your answer — "the pain in my knee," "my daughter" — in a book provided, an "artist-activator" will talk with you about it. And if you wish, you and that artist can enter the inner sanctum and join others who are walking very slowly. You can walk with them for as long as you like, and you may hear words from your conversation become part of an improvised collective song. You might even sing yourself.

A factor in favor of joining: You'll almost certainly be walking with the choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili. For most people, this will also be highly unusual. Tall, striking and charismatic (that's her in the video for Jay-Z's "4:44"), Ms. Okpokwasili is the opposite of ordinary, an expectation-confounding blend of authority and vulnerability.

Her hard-to-classify works, like "Bronx Gothic," have earned her piles of awards, including a MacArthur grant. They are intense and enigmatic, and often loaded with tests of endurance. And while she says that "Sitting on a Man's Head" isn't a performance, and though it is closer to mindfulness practice than to conventional choreography, participating in it feels something like being inside one of those works, with her.

Like most of her projects, she is creating "Sitting on a Man's Head" with her husband, the designer and director Peter Born. "Peter and I already have a very dense collaborative process," Ms. Okpokwasili said before a recent rehearsal. But her creative process usually involves other performers, too: "I'm always posing questions and asking the performers to respond to text. The work is an active collaboration, something that happens between us."

Audrey Hailes and Ms. Okpokwasili rehearsing at Movement Research, 122 Community Center. Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

It's a way of making art that, for Ms. Okpokwasili, has an application outside of art making: "What is it to make a space where people understand that they're being heard and know that what they give is essential?"

"I'm always posing questions and asking the performers to respond to text."
Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Now, she's inviting the public into this process — "where we are compelled to listen to each other and be linked together, with the potential for anything to happen."

The concept also emerges from the creation of a recent piece, during which she and the other performers improvised together in song, listening and riffing. "The voice is so deeply personal and singular," she explained, "but also incredibly porous in the way it seems to break the boundaries of other people's skin. So this is a practice of being inside of yourself and projecting to the deep inside of someone else."

Like her 2017 work "Poor People's TV Room," this project draws on research that she, the child of Nigerian immigrants, has done into protest movements of Nigerian women.

"There was a practice called Sitting on a Man," she said. "When women are feeling aggrieved by a man who has power, they go to his residence and they do a durational performance demanding change, and they don't leave until they get it."

"That's fascinating to me," she continued, "but I'm not a social justice worker. So I started to think: What if you make a space that isn't directed to somebody outside of the circle who is hurting you? What if you make a space to hear each other, free from judgment, a space for restoration? That sounds to me like the process I use when making work."

"The work is an active collaboration, something that happens between us."
Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Yes, but why the slow walking? "We're surrounded by people regularly enacting acts of virtuosity," she said. "Slowing down helps us be together. It's a rupture from what you normally do, a resensitizing to micro-perceptions."

Why four hours? "I'm interested in what happens when you stay in one thing for a long time. Sometimes it can be really hard and painful. But when you get past something, I think it's bliss."

But, really, why four hours? "Because we couldn't do it any longer. St. Mark's wants its church back."

St. Mark's, the home of Danspace Project, which is now in its 45th year, is still an active site of worship. And the space must also be shared with the many other parts of the Platform series, organized by Ms. Okpokwasili with Danspace's executive director, Judy Hussie-Taylor.

Saturdays will be devoted to conversations and other activities among writers and performers engaged with the Platform's themes: voice and body, kin and care, slowness. Ms. Okpokwasili will share an evening with the like-minded composer-performer Samita Sinha. The choreographers Meryem Jazouli and Nacera Belaza, both of whom draw from North African dance and song, share an evening. And

larger groups of artists, sharing their own evenings, will present artistic responses to questions the organizers have posed.

Ms. Okpokwasili with Judy Hussie-Taylor, the director of Danspace. “We’re using our collective minds to be generative,” Ms. Hussie-Taylor said of the Platforms. Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

All of this, Ms. Hussie-Taylor said, is representative of how the artist-curated Platforms have evolved since she introduced the idea 10 years ago: “It’s a way of turning questions that might never be answered into a different kind of performance event, where artistic practice can be shared.”

In the Platforms, monthlong packages of themed performances and discussions, Ms. Hussie-Taylor and artist-curators like Reggie Wilson and Ishmael Huston-Jones have gathered together artists who seem to be investigating similar things. “We’re using our collective minds to be generative,” she said. “Out of that, people eventually make amazing pieces, but it doesn’t always happen within the context of the Platform. It might be the seed. It opens up possibilities.”

Ms. Okpokwasili likened that process to “Sitting on a Man’s Head,” which is “not about showing people what we do. It’s about opening a channel to be in a relationship with others. We’re not all singing the same song, but if the song can hold all those layers of contention and contradiction, the things you need and the things that are necessary to sustain the group, then it goes into one space we’re all sharing.”

Through earlier iterations of “Sitting” at the 2018 Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art and last year in Houston (it heads to the Tate Modern in London at the end of March), Ms. Okpokwasili and Mr. Born have been refining it. A barrage of questions posed to guests has boiled down to one. An array of gestures developed with guests has narrowed to just the walking and whatever movement is needed to find ease in that walking.

Brittany Engel-Adams, rehearsing “Sitting on a Man’s Head.” The Platforms themes are voice and body, kin and care, slowness. Credit. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

“We’ve been working on keeping it a liberated space,” Ms. Okpokwasili said. “How to make the guests understand that they’re always free to go? You stay as long as you want to stay, and maybe a little longer because something unexpected could happen.”

What could that be? Giggle fits, screaming, weeping, boredom, cramps, communion. “It’s whatever needs to happen, and sometimes you know when it’s landed,” she said. “But then I have to critique that, because it’s about falling in and out of it, it’s about making and unmaking. If it happened the same way all the time, I would be concerned.”

The key is to help guests grasp the potential of bringing something into the space. “What does it do to somebody to hear a lyric from their conversation get picked up by the others?” she asked. “What does it feel like for that to come back to you?”

“I know what it does to me to pay that kind of attention, and to have that attention be paid,” she said. “I don’t know what it will do to other people, but I want to make the space to see.”

ADAKU'S REVOLT

Photo by Ian Douglas

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 room

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

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.

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