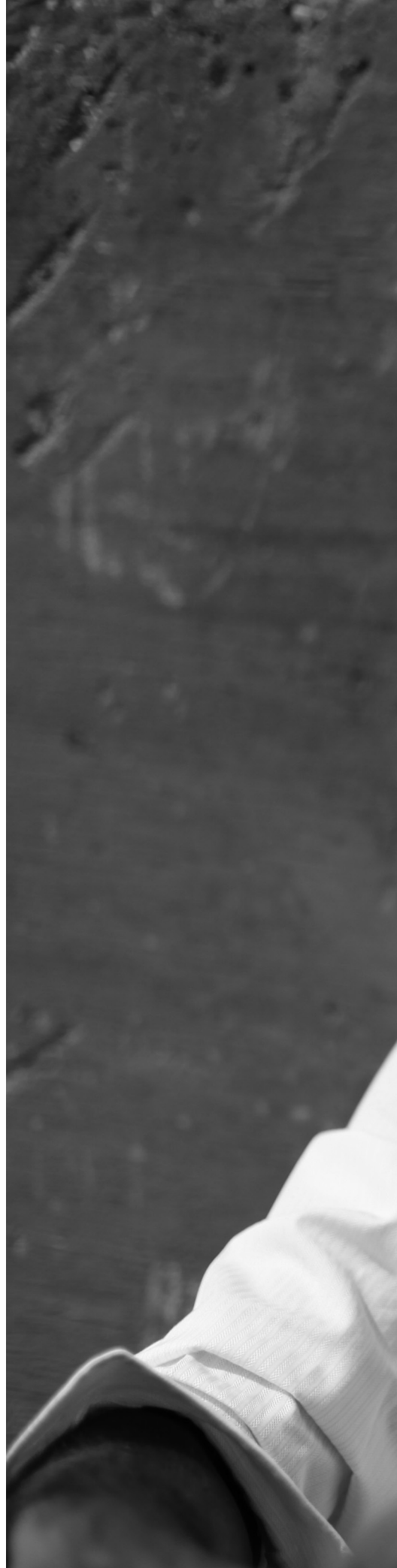


New Day Rising

Brendan Fernandes Returns to Dance

BY BEN PORTIS

BRENDAN Fernandes has re-emerged on the Canadian dance scene as an unanticipated, almost unlikely contributor, bringing tremendous energy, vision, intelligence and originality to his choreographies. “Unlikely” because Fernandes has forged a spectacular career in Canadian visual art over the past five years, with solo exhibitions in Canada and New York (including at several public galleries), and a profuse list of group exhibitions (including at the National Gallery of Canada, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany). His work has been placed in prestigious public collections (including the National Gallery of Canada), and he has had two nominations for the Sobey Art Award (he made the shortlist in 2010). Yet when I suggest to Fernandes that this profile in *The Dance Current* might re-introduce him to the Canadian dance community, he replies that he retains a sense of camaraderie with his cohort, despite having been absent from the field for a decade.





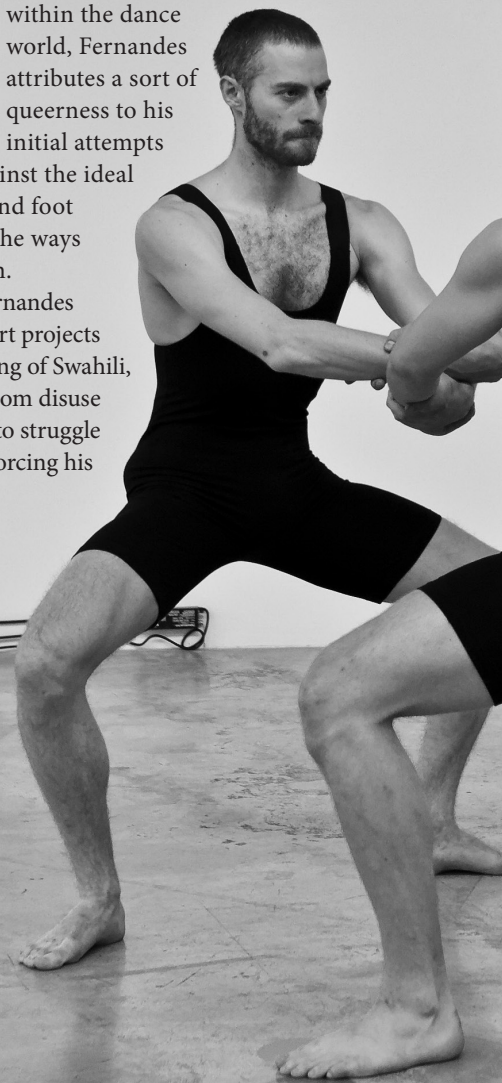
"My love for dance began in theatre," he says. "At the age of fourteen, I began taking dance classes in my hometown of Newmarket, Ontario, at the Peter Stanton School of Dance. I took ballet, tap, jazz and modern and participated in competitions." In 1998, Fernandes entered Toronto's York University, taking on a BFA with a double major in visual arts and dance. "I majored in ballet and modern technique. I also took classes in composition, improvisation, conditioning, dance science and repertoire. And I took open classes and workshops with the National Ballet and Toronto Dance Theatre." In 2002, Fernandes sustained a hamstring injury that finally forced him to abandon his long-nurtured ambition to be a dancer. "The injury was part of a chronic problem. I have very short and tight hamstrings; they were always an issue. The main injury occurred in my fourth year of university." Fernandes realized that to achieve success, he would have to forsake one of his passions for the other. Facing obstacles of physique and condition, he directed his attention to visual art. Fernandes followed his studies at York with an MFA at the University of Western Ontario, and was then accepted into the Independent Study Program run by the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was the first of many prestigious artist residencies that have kept him travelling much of the time. Since 2007, Fernandes has maintained his principal studio in New York.

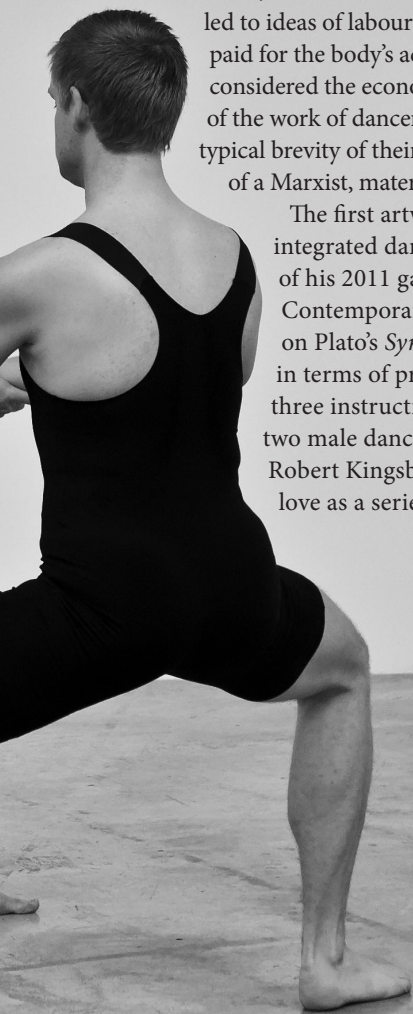
Fernandes was born in Nairobi, Kenya, of Indian descent – his ancestry is from Goa, the former Portuguese province in West India. His family immigrated to Canada in 1989 when he was a child. Themes of origin, identity, colour, colonialism, migration, nationality, language and translation have permeated his art practice, technically situated in sculpture, photography, video and performance. Fernandes also channels these interests through a queer sensibility that expresses not only his sexual orientation but extends to general

issues of inclusion and diversity. For instance, while he was away from dance performance, social dance (i.e., clubbing) became his vital arena for participation and community. And although homosexuality might be regarded as a normalized condition within the dance world, Fernandes attributes a sort of queerness to his initial attempts

to belong, labouring against the ideal body type, skin colour and foot shape, acutely aware of the ways that he failed to conform.

From 2008 to 2010, Fernandes engaged in step-by-step art projects that involved the relearning of Swahili, which he had forgotten from disuse since childhood. He had to struggle through pronunciation, forcing his





face, mouth and tongue into difficult muscular moves. “Dance could be consistent with the rigorous dedication that I had made to the art world,” he says. “The dance discipline directed me to learn how and what the body remembers, in terms of vocabulary and skills, but also in terms of adjustments of language and codes as elements of one’s practice.”

Before returning to dance, however, Fernandes had to come to terms with his former relationship to dance itself. He likens leaving the community and the life that dance distinctly fostered to a “painful breakup” – it was a time that seemed over, there was resignation to lost desire. By 2010, sensing that he was ready to return on new terms, Fernandes tested his physical capability and discovered complex new meanings in loss. Due to his age and long hiatus, Fernandes discovered his body’s limitations, how it endures, how it is a machine. These poignant discoveries led to ideas of labour and how dancers, i.e., artists, are paid for the body’s activation. Fernandes remarks, “I considered the economy of dance and the labour value of the work of dancers, so radically collapsed by the typical brevity of their careers. I saw this along the lines of a Marxist, materialist structure.”

The first artwork into which Fernandes integrated dance was *Encomium*, an element of his 2011 gallery exhibition at Diaz Contemporary, Toronto. He based *Encomium* on Plato’s *Symposium*, which describes love in terms of praise. Fernandes composed three instructional texts according to which two male dancers, Sky Fairchild-Waller and Robert Kingsbury, performed asymmetrical love as a series of physically demanding poses

in which they held one another in place, static, mirroring, beyond the capacity of either one to do so by himself. Each grasped hold ended in movement, as one or both collapsed at the moment of failure. The dancers then briefly walked off the tension and repeated the maneuver. These cycles of endurance were executed amidst a set of three minimal sculptures that each displayed and dispensed one of the verse libretti as paper sheets. Each dancer wore a plain black singlet, suggesting that he too was a sculptural unit. However, as much as physical counterbalance, the pair held each other in place by their mutually transfixing gazes of adoration.

In 2012, Fernandes devised a second work in which dancers were likened to abstract geometric forms. *The Working Move* was devised at a residency at Vancouver’s Western Front. For the first time, Fernandes employed a proxy choreographer/collaborator – Justine Chambers – who directed a corps of two male and three female dancers through what seemed to be an open class, an unusual offering for spectatorship. Accompanied by a rehearsal pianist, Chambers coached the group through movements that they essentially had to learn in public. The action would stop and start, interrupted by exaggerated directions issued anonymously to “Dancer One” or “Dancer Two.” On and around the stage several plain white sculpture bases and plinths were placed, the dancers might occasionally stretch or rest against them; at other times they lugged them as stiff, inert partners, alternately and implicitly objectifying their bodies and anthropomorphizing the artifacts.

Fernandes is currently preparing his most ambitious piece to date. *Night Shift*, commissioned for Toronto’s 2013 Nuit Blanche in October, has been conceived for the full dusk-to-dawn duration of the event. It is modelled after the thirteen-hour 1653 French court ballet that culminated in the coronation of Louis XIV as



the Sun King. Fernandes is collaborating with choreographer and Dancemakers Artistic Director Michael Trent on the creation of the project. (Indeed, Fernandes acknowledges that an additional consideration that led him back to dance is the value and joy he takes in collaborative creative experience.) Says Trent, "We were completely unfamiliar with one another. The first time I got really excited with Brendan's proposition was when we spoke on the phone. He writes with tremendous knowledge, but I was really compelled by his responsiveness in conversation and I sensed a tremendous opportunity to develop ideas together. We share working from a conceptual framework."

Night Shift will require sixteen dancers, rotating in shifts of four, who will address the very idea of duration. As Fernandes explains, "It is about the idea of becoming, an articulation of what will be. The new day begins at the end of the piece. I take that to the concept of tomorrow and a new age. Following the darkness of its performance, daylight brings clarity." This attitude is exemplified by the collaboration between Fernandes and Trent. "Because of our different experiences, our definitions of things vary, but we can talk toward clarification," Fernandes points out. Trent adds, "I ask, 'What does the work want?' In that way, it is a led collaboration." The two artists will shape *Night Shift* through formal and tactical decisions to incorporate difference and pace it with moments of interest for the performers. It also carries forward Fernandes' standing concerns with labour. Interposed with conventionally recognizable passages of dance, throughout the night the performers will also produce a fusillade of gold confetti that will eventually be showered to welcome the break of the new day. ~

Sommaire Brendan Fernandes réémerge dans le milieu de la danse canadienne à titre d'intervenant presque inattendu ; ses chorégraphies font preuve de beaucoup d'énergie, de vision, d'intelligence et d'originalité. « Inattendu » puisque depuis les cinq dernières années, Fernandes développe une carrière spectaculaire en arts visuels, avec des expositions solos au Canada et à New York (y compris dans plusieurs musées), une liste étoffée d'expositions de groupe (notamment au Musée des beaux-arts du Canada [MBAC], au Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, au Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art et au ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art à Karlsruhe, Allemagne). Son travail figure dans de prestigieuses collections publiques (dont celle du MBAC), et est retenu à deux reprises pour le Sobey Art Award (il est sur la liste courte en 2010). L'artiste polymathe prépare actuellement sa chorégraphie la plus ambitieuse jusque-là. *Night Shift*, une commande de la Nuit Blanche 2013 à Toronto, est conçue pour la durée entière de l'événement, du couchant au lever du soleil. La pièce s'inspire de la structure du ballet de treize heures de la cour française de 1653 qui culmine avec le couronnement du Roi-Soleil, Louis XIV.

Learn more >> brendanfernandes.ca

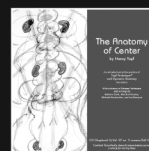


Ben Portis is the curator of the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie. In September 2014, the MacLaren will present the collaborative exhibition Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes: *In Your Words*.

Michael Trent, Brendan Fernandes, Colleen Snell, Robert Abubo, Amanda Acorn and Jolyane Langlois in rehearsal for *Night Shift* by Fernandes in collaboration with Trent and Dancemakers / Photo by Ömer Yükseler

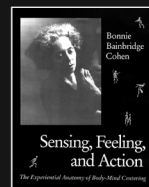
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