



A Provocateur's Perspective

Ruminating on James Batchelor's new work

Text: Zander Porter

Choreographer James Batchelor's latest work "An Evening-length Performance" was developed in the palatial foyer of the 19th-century Royal City Theatre in Bruges as well as in studios in Berlin and Bassano del Grappa. Initially participating as a performer and later as an outside eye, Zander Porter reflects on the creation process.

In the 16th century, French cleric Jehan Tabourot published his "Orchésographie", a study of French Renaissance social dance that included the basse danse, the branle, the pavane and the galliarde. As a social dance for privileged classes, ballroom emerged from these forms as a term in the early modern period, where "ballroom" derived closely from "dance room", and in historical positioning would contrast "folk" dance as a lower-class pastime. The complex underbelly of social dance as such must be considered within the frames of colonization, Westernization and ethnic cleansing, which would more readily embellish and preserve the images, fabrics, and bloodlines of 'ballroom' dance(r)s. Distinguishments of 'ball' and 'folk' thus might often be racial-elitist, costume-oriented or archive-based.

There exist examples, however, of ball-folk code-switching: the 1990 film "Paris is Burning" documents a titillating and culturally multiplying movement in ballroom, depicting key figures from the countercultural ballroom scene of Latinx- and African-American LGBTQ+ communities in Harlem, New York City. They initiated strategies for a new ball, in which gender, class and race did not require correspondence with the overwhelmingly white, wealthy and gender-binarized history of ballroom dance. The movement (voguing, walking, posing) events continue today globally, appropriating ballroom's emphasis on competition while simultaneously functioning as life-supporting structures of community. Attending balls became a way for estranged queer individuals to develop new houses and families.

In "An Evening-length Performance" we witness a social dance whose choreographies recall fashions and feelings of ballroom's more distant pasts, while indenting its own edge into the entangled genre – crucially not intending to coopt or participate in post-90s contemporary ballroom culture. Its moments of pairing reminisce of ballroom's man-with-woman embraces, but the genders invoked by its bodies and movements resonate more coevally, complicating the heteronormative ideals which would 'click' with audiences as 'appropriate' – and in many cases, 'relatable'. Gender's etymological connection to French 'genre' opens doors for reconstructing the violent and individuating nature of 'gender'. In genre, our feelings, reactions and reflections upon a person's or group's presences are ambivalently beautiful genders themselves. What is a way then,

perhaps, to read the gender-genre of the movement, the duo, or the whole group-unit itself, rather than picking apart apparent masculinities and femininities of individual members?

In the foyer of the past and in the performance at present, an unsuspecting choreography of recognition and directionality reflects and fractures traditional spatial functions. Bodies' eyes maintain sharply forward gazes, together painting a horizontal web of eyesight. The web floats above the floor at eye level, a plane of gazes intersecting each other and fragmenting the enclosure of the performance "stage". Dancing partnerships appear less romantically coded when attention is not always performed inwardly nor mutually. Indirect notions of invitation and intimacy are thus floated outside, around and in between audience corners.

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As a social-choreographic network, "An Evening-length Performance" is describable by performative nodes, representing fleeting bits of individuals and unseeable moments of process. Without a clear competitive motivation nor inseparable duos, the work evacuates any obvious purpose from the traditional win/lose functions of ballroom. The resulting performed sociality is instead contemplative. A matrix of idiosyncrasies architects a social dance of both ghostly past and present bodies, expanding beyond the frame of 'evening-length'. Temporal openness distends further than 16th/17th-century historical and 19th-century ballrooms. Through its multi-embodied spike in time, let "An Evening-length Performance" ask: what is a depiction of futurity we know we want versus one we are nostalgic for? 📌

Zander Porter and James Batchelor have been collaborating since 2018. The original text can be found in full at <https://www.james-batchelor.com.au/>

James Batchelor and Collaborators

An Evening-length Performance

Sophiensæle Festsaal | 12.–15.8., 19:00 | Weltpremiere