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Left to right: José E. Muñoz, Isaac Julien and Russell Maliphant after the Nov. 8, 2007, performance of "Cast No Shadow"



Video triptych from Isaac Julien's *True North* (2005)



Vanessa Myrie in *True North*



Isaac Julien and Russell Maliphant's "Cast No Shadow"

DISASTER TEAM

by Ben Davis

What is revered British video artist Isaac Julien doing collaborating with London-based choreographer Russell Maliphant? Julien is famous for filmmaking that is richly referential, with overlapping explorations of gay identity, racial issues and film history. Maliphant, on the other hand, is known for a style of dance that one mainstream admirer described as "an almost hieratic reduction of ballet to its essence."

Their collaboration, titled "Cast No Shadow" and performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of the current Performa biennial of performance art, Nov. 6 and 8-10, 2007, has received decidedly mixed reviews. And it's true, it does not really come together. In some ways, it doesn't even try. Of the three chapters that make up the piece, the first, *True North*, is based on a recent film installation by Julien of the same name recut to provide "holes" in which Maliphant's choreography can insert itself. The second, *Fantôme Afrique*, is another recent Julien film, shown pretty much in its original form as a stage-filling video triptych, sans any new collaborative content. Only the third piece, *Small Boats*, is an attempt at a new synthesis.

So why are these two men together and what does their partnership mean? There are two answers to these questions. The first has to do with RoseLee Goldberg, the director of Performa, who pursued the match-up as a showy centerpiece for her festival. As a fierce champion of performance art, you'd think Goldberg would want to defend the discipline's native history, logic and rigor. Instead, she has used many of her "Performa Commissions" to encourage artists whose work is not performance-based to add live theatrical elements to their works, Julien's piece being the most prominent example.

Unfortunately, art being a qualitative and not quantitative discipline, 1 + 1 does not always equal 2. At a Q&A following the Nov. 8 performance, the two collaborators were questioned by Tisch performance studies director José E. Muñoz, who noted that what united their respective bodies of work was their "use of beauty," an "unpopular" concept, asking them why they chose to "use beauty." Julien -- who tends to pepper his speech with the kind of language popular in PhD theses in the '90s -- responded at length about the "criticality of beauty" and its role in political discourse; Maliphant responded, "I don't know," then compared dance to calligraphy and the search for the "right line." Muñoz followed up by asking about ideas of gender in the collaboration. To this, Julien said that he viewed his central actress, Vanessa Myrie, who plays a male role in *True North*, as "a sort of postcolonial *flâneur*, though obviously not a *flâneur* in the *laissez-faire* sense;" Maliphant answered that the film was about intimacy between men, so he tried to create a dance that involved men working together.

It is true, of course, that Julien's work is beautiful, something evident in the imagery of *True North*, shown at BAM onstage as a three-screen projection. The work has a meditative quality, taking as its subject the journey of Matthew Henson, an African American believed to be the first person to reach the North Pole. It gives the viewer



Image from Isaac Julien's *Fantôme Créole* (2005)



Image from Isaac Julien's *Fantôme Créole* (2005)



Image from Isaac Julien's *Fantôme Créole* (2005)



Stephen Galloway in Isaac Julien's *Fantôme Créole Series (Papillon no2)* (2005)
Viviane Bregman Fine Art

ample time to linger on the interiors of ice chapels, thundering cataracts, herds of silent caribou and Vanessa Myrie's tiny form making its way across vast ice plains, in the Henson role. The muscular, gliding choreography Maliphanth has devised to accompany the film is also not unappealing, employing a team of white-clad dancers who weave in and out between the screens, as well as Myrie herself, who moves trance-like across the stage, echoing her onscreen presence.

Yet the dance elements often quite literally come as an interruption of the film rather than as a complement to its imagery -- more than once, the projections shut down, squares of white light appear on the stage, and we take a time-out to watch a few minutes of dance, before returning to the immersive imagery of the film. Maliphanth serves up lots of dance moves involving people lifting or catching one another, but it is never certain what the abstract movements represent in relation to the fascinating and concrete polar setting of the film. Emotional turmoil? The unpredictable movement of history? Frostbite?

Even though the next section of "Cast No Shadow," *Fantôme Afrique*, lacks any new dance elements, it still provides more material for assessing the awkward fit between Julien and Maliphanth. Shown as a three-channel installation, the film takes the viewer through a series of parched National Geographic-ish settings in the African nation of Burkina Faso (this footage, incidentally, has a history of being in dialogue with *True North*, specifically in 2005's *Fantôme Créole*, which brought the Arctic and African footage together into parallel montage). It lingers on soulful images of women staring into the camera, boys passing on bicycles, dramatic monuments, and Myrie again, this time appearing and disappearing mysteriously and representing, according to Julien, the "Angel of History" from philosopher Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (someday we'll have to have a moratorium on the "Angel of History" trope).

Despite the seductiveness of this imagery, however, one gets the sense that Julien can't let go of his images. He always seems to be thinking about them *as images*, just as in his conversation everything he says is self-consciously threaded back through his critical buzz-terms. In the video, the camera repeatedly pulls back to show the artist himself filming the action, while the different channels are intercut with grainy footage of Africans supposedly taken from films by the first European colonial explorers.

A dancer is prominently featured in *Fantôme Afrique* -- the lean, dreadlocked Stephen Galloway -- and this is supposed to be the thread that connects this film to the Performa collaboration. However, as Galloway shambles through the action doing a kind of shamanistic modern dance routine, you get the feeling that he is more of a conceptual cipher than a human presence, standing for ideas about performance, spectacle, the racialized body and so on. This contrasts to Julien's onstage collaboration with Maliphanth, whose dancers are not ciphers but have an independent presence and vocabulary all their own.

Which brings us, finally, to the fatal third segment of "Cast No Shadow," *Small Boats*, the heart of the Julien/Maliphanth team-up. The two men, Myrie and assorted dancers traveled together to Sicily to collaborate on the filmed sections of the project (for the curious, an installation of the film elements, under the title "Western Union: Small Boats," is up at Metro Pictures in Chelsea). At BAM, a translucent scrim hangs in front of the stage and the work begins with a giant projected image filling it -- a right-to-left tracking shot moving across a seemingly unending graveyard of ships. A black seam appears up the center of the image, gradually widening to



Lampedusa from Isaac Julien's *Small Boats* series (2007)



Isaac Julien
Western Union Series No. 4 (Flight Towards Other Destinies 3)
2007
Metro Pictures



Isaac Julien
Western Union Series No. 1 (Cast No Shadow)
2007
Metro Pictures

reveal the stage behind, where Maliphaunt's dancers surge and crouch.

The video proceeds to explore the picturesque, rocky shores of Sicily, where we see Myrie again, seemingly in the same "angel" role she played in *Fantôme Afrique*, as well as Maliphaunt's dancers bounding over the rugged terrain. A sequence set in an extravagant palace follows, where the dancers are filmed clamoring up and down a giant stairway, then rolling or being sucked up and down the steps by invisible forces. Next, we see images of tourists playing on the shore, with the camera picking out discarded clothes floating in the water -- and then corpses covered in silver blankets laid out on the beach. There is interplay throughout between the images and the dancers behind, alternatively echoing the onscreen actions and doing routines that serve as abstract counterpoint.

It all builds to a climax that is by far the most integrated moment of "Cast No Shadow." At the bottom of the giant screen, slowly, a turbulent blue underwater vista rises, coming to overlay the entire surface. Meanwhile, behind this on stage, several nets have been lowered from the ceiling, and the audience watches as the dancers slowly raise themselves up the webs. Suspended above the stage and viewed through the images of water, they slowly tangle themselves in the nets in a balletic act of simulated drowning that lasts several long minutes. Finally, the projection cuts to stage-filling images of the same dancers underwater, thrashing, bubbles gushing from their mouths.

According to Julien, *Small Boats* is meant as a reflection on the plight of North Africans trying to escape to Europe. Recent times have brought a sharp increase in this migration, with desperate refugees shipwrecking and drowning off the coast of Sicily in escalating numbers, threatening to overwhelm the locals and portending bad things for future European/African relations -- hence the film's images of wrecked boats, tourists mingling with corpses, and drowning dancers. It helps to have the background firmly in mind in advance, though; the Bill Viola-meets-Cirque du Soleil vibe onstage does not exactly connect the dots, nor does it even convey the events' horror on an abstract level.

This brings us to the second answer as to the significance of the collaboration between Julien and Maliphaunt. Reviewers of "Cast No Shadow" have been unkind to Maliphaunt, at least in part because his "hieratic" style seems so glaringly out of place when set against the kind of pressing social issues Julien apparently wants to incorporate. But this is unfair -- Maliphaunt is clearly just doing what he was brought in to do. The truth is that "Cast No Shadow" in general, and *Small Boats* in particular, merely makes apparent a latent tension in Julien's own work. On the one hand, he proposes himself as tackling various specific social and political issues. On the other, he has made a fetish of a certain type of arch "art cinema" -- characterized by a slow pace, non-linearity, hall-of-mirrors intertextual references and, oh yes, an ambient soundtrack -- to be pursued whatever the topic.

In this light, Maliphaunt's dancers are no more out of place in *Small Boats* than the sequence Julien has filmed in the palace, a spectacular set-piece but slightly mystifying in relation to his stated theme. To understand why Julien has incorporated this locale, it helps to know that the Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi is also the setting of Luchino Visconti's film *The Leopard*, which tackled the decline of aristocratic society in Italy. At a certain, rarified level, then, employing the palazzo is some kind of statement about the old European boundaries crumbling before the pressure of the new global order. But it is an oblique statement at best, buried under several layers of intellectual mud.



Isaac Julien
Western Union Series No. 6 (Afterlife)
 2007
 Metro Pictures

I would humbly suggest that a work exploring ongoing events that have been dubbed the "Sicilian Holocaust" might be an awkward time to dabble willy-nilly in the world of abstract dance. But this choice is no more of a non-sequitur than the thematic decision, which one assumes was Julien's, to combine the three pieces that make up "Cast No Shadow" into one evening of theater -- what do Mathew Henson's possible discovery of the North Pole, the monuments of Burkina Faso and the astronomical death toll of African migrants have in common, besides the fact that they all elicit a vague sense of liberal pathos (the program justifies it like this: they all "focus on aspects of location and dislocation")? Since catastrophic suffering is apparently a motif for Julien, something that you "bear witness" to in a disembodied, angelic way, rather than concrete material to be presented, it is no surprise that he might think it would be well served by being converted into ballet.

But what kind of statement is this, really? What does it really tell us about the world? I can't think of a useful answer to these questions. Except, that is, to say that *Small Boats* provides yet more evidence -- since Julien is so fond of Walter Benjamin -- that society's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an esthetic pleasure of the first order."

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



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