

Friday, March 18, 2016, 8pm  
Saturday, March 19, 2016, 2pm  
Zellerbach Playhouse

## Trajal Harrell

### *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*

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|------------------------|--|
| <i>Choreography</i>    | Trajal Harrell   |
| <i>Dancers</i>         | Trajal Harrell, Thibault Lac,<br>Wei Ming Pak, Perle Palombe,<br>Stephen Thompson, Christina Vassiliou,<br>Ondřej Vidlár |
| <i>Voiceover</i>       | Rob Fordeyn  |
| <i>Lighting Design</i> | Stéfane Perraud  |
| <i>Set Design</i>      | Erik Flatmo and Trajal Harrell   |
| <i>Soundtrack</i>      | Trajal Harrell   |
| <i>Costumes</i>        | Trajal Harrell and the performers  |
| <i>Dramaturgy</i>      | Gérard Mayen   |

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Trajal Harrell exploded onto the American and European dance scene with an incredible series of “dance-fiction” developed over several years: *Paris is Burning at The Judson Church*, where conceptual experiments in postmodern dance clash with lascivious poses of “voguing,” derived from the African-American and Latino underground culture. With *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*, Harrell begins a new body of work and invents an even more improbable meeting—one between Dominique Bagouet, renowned figure of 1980s French New Dance, and Tatsumi Hijikata, the founding father of *butoh*. These two legends of contemporary dance, perhaps unknown to many, provide a pretext for an irreverent tribute. Harrell leads the imagination through a constantly changing field of Wikipedia-art-meets-an-encyclopedia-of-dance style. Here, the fiction of the fake meets the fantasy of the real where Harrell stakes claim to make a piece as Bagouet making a piece as Hijikata or Hijikata making a piece as Bagouet. Either way, the emerging aesthetic is clearly Harrell’s own.

Trajal Harrell’s work has been presented in New York and the US at many venues, including The Kitchen, New York Live Arts, TBA Festival, Walker Arts Center, American Realness Festival, ICA Boston, Danspace Project, Crossing the Line Festival, DTW, PS 122, Cornell University, Philadelphia Fringe Festival, and Los Angeles’ REDCAT Theater. His work has been presented in international festivals such as the Festival d’Automne (Paris), Rencontres Chorégraphiques (Paris), Holland Festival (Amsterdam), Festival d’Avignon, Impulstanz

(Vienna), TanzimAugust (Berlin), and Panorama Festival (Rio de Janeiro). He has also shown performance work in visual art contexts at venues including MoMA and the New Museum (NYC), Fondation Cartier (Paris), the Margulies Art Warehouse (Miami), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Serralves Museum (Porto), Centre Pompidou-Metz, Centre Pompidou-Paris, ICA Boston, and Art Basel-Miami Beach. Harrell has been a recipient of fellowships from the Saison Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, Art Matters Foundation, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and in 2014 was one of the inaugural recipients of the Doris Duke Impact Award.

Harrell is well known for a series of works entitled *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church*, which reimagine meetings between early postmodern dance and the voguing dance tradition and were created in seven sizes. All of the works in the series continue to tour internationally. *Antigone Sr.*, the largest, won the 2012 “Bessie” Award for Best Production. Most recently, Harrell began new research examining *butoh* dance from the theoretical praxis of voguing. This latest body of work includes *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry*, commissioned and premiered at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where he has begun a two-year residency; *The Return of the Modern Dance* for Cullberg Ballet; *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*, which premiered at the 2015 Montpellier Dance Festival; and *The Return of La Argentina*, co-commissioned by MoMA and Le Centre National de la Danse.

#### Choreographer’s Notes

sometimes there feels like there was another you and me. and i know you and i had to change. but it feels like you and me, the ones that we were must be still living somewhere. going about their lives the way we did. but someplace where we can’t reach them nor see them nor hear them. but we were once them. and yet now i can’t remember how exactly we came to be who we aren’t. was it fast? but

we’re not them anymore and if we aren’t us anymore, then maybe who we are now isn’t who we are now either. maybe love is just a ghost hanging about between who we are confused about being who we once were. this ghost can’t tell the difference and is doomed to linger without coming into a unique form.

—Trajal Harrell

June 2, 2015, Paris, France



# FINDING FREEDOM IN THE NOT KNOWING

An interview with choreographer Trajal Harrell and dramaturge Gérard Mayen

**GM:** Over these last years you've created a coherent series of pieces under the generic title *Paris is Burning at the Judson Church*, a sort of variation on a fictional theme of a meeting between two physical performance traditions, both possessing extreme critical potential; two currents that came into being simultaneously in New York, but that never encountered each other. On one hand, the voguing of young gays and Afro-American and Latino trans from

Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn; and on the other hand, white, *avant garde* artists (crest of the wave) dance professionals from the post-modern dance movement of the Village. What made you decide to end the series? What conclusions has this work brought you to?

**TH:** *We did choose to conclude the performances in the series with the made-to-measure size, Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem. I wanted*

to end a 13-year period of research on the historical relationship between voguing dance tradition and early postmodern dance, and I wanted to end with a bang, so to speak. So the series was meant to come to an end, in and of itself; however, I reached the conclusion that this research will probably always be a part of my work. After 13 years, I realized that this was my formative

GM: Your new piece, *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*, repeats the idea of a fictional and highly unlikely encounter between two personalities emblematic of two important dance trends of the 20th century: The French New Dance of the 1980s embodied by Dominique Bagouet and Japanese *butoh* dance embodied by its founder, Tatsumi Hijikata.

What did you expect to gather from this fictional encounter? What does it allow you to create?

TH: Since I was 12 years old, I have been making performances based on my own history. For six consecutive years, during junior high and high school, I won first place at the State History Day Competition in group performance. So, I have come to realize that this is my *modus operandi*. It allows me to make something contemporary. The meandering around the two things allows me to make a third thing. Yet, it's a meandering; a sensing; a smell. I don't try to excavate Bagouet or Hijikata. This is one of the misunderstandings about my work. People thought my work was about voguing. It was not about voguing, nor was it voguing. I didn't take a class of voguing or talk to any voguers until nine

years after I had been researching and had made two pieces in the series. It's the same with Bagouet and Hijikata. I try not to know too much, because I am not interested in making a Bagouet or a Hijikata piece. Yet, if I find myself nosing around their history and aesthetics, I somehow discover



The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai

training. My perceptions and the way I think about dance have been shaped by this experience. Therefore, my new research is still very much related to the tension between the theoretical notion of realism in voguing and that of authenticity in early postmodern dance.

*myself. It's kind of like the buddhist koen: wherever you go, there you are. So it's important: the piece is not about Bagouet or Hijikata. The work proposes an imaginary meeting between Bagouet, Hijikata, and Ellen Stewart, the founder of La Mama Experimental Theater in New York. But it's an imaginary meeting. The key word is "imaginary." And I try to stay away from art that is about anything. "About-ness" I find limiting.*

**GM:** In France, many artists are interested in what the American innovations contributed to dance. They willingly question and do thorough research on this subject. One could imagine with your project, particularly concerning Dominique Bagouet, that you reciprocate. However, you have a very free, distant, and even freakish approach. What underlies this tone of research in your work?

**TH:** *I was first taken by the fact that we Americans don't know very much about dance history in France. We tend to write contemporary dance history from our own perspective, and generously leave out many contexts. I therefore wanted to challenge my own knowledge but not by re-establishing another paradigmatic history. Rather, I try to make history something that we can all play with and, from that, hopefully recognize that history is always skewed from a very personal perspective. I think as an exercise this frees our imagination for thinking about the possibilities for the future.*

**GM:** *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai* is infused with strong reminiscences of voguing, references to the world of fashion, its brand names, shows, catwalks and the invention of self through an elaboration of vestimentary appearances. Neither artist cited was involved in such preoccupations. How do you explain the continued use of these same motives?

**TH:** *I am an artist with his own history and preoccupations. This is primarily what I am working on. Again, I am not doing an essay on Bagouet*

*and Hijikata. I am doing a piece by Trajal Harrell, so Trajal Harrell's history of making is going to be the main ingredient. That said, there are, of course, my signatures—like the runway—which have been in every piece I've made since 1999. My friend, the visual artist Sarah Sze, likened it to the abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman's vertical lines, called "zips." So, I'm influenced by how voguing uses fashion as one of many potential operations within "realness." It's the same with me; I am not using fashion as fashion. For me, these are forms through which we can leverage the body through time, energy, and space. Or yes, it can become a way to reinvent identity and the imagination.*

**GM:** Karaoke, talk shows, and the raw humor of circumstance, very popular performance strategies that are sprinkled throughout your work, are rarely used in more sophisticated art forms. What do they signify?

**TH:** *The breakdown between so-called high art and low art in contemporary Western art has been going on vigorously since the 1960s. So, I came into my artistic education with those walls already down. For me, it signifies contemporary culture and a sophisticated aesthetic.*

**GM:** What moves you in the personalities and physical performances of Dominique Bagouet and Tatsumi Hijikata? In what way do they influence the movement in your piece?

**TH:** *I think I am, first and foremost, affected by the fact that both Bagouet and Hijikata lives were larger than the art they produced. Their work was not just about creation but also about larger missions for dance. This "legendary" quality, and the fact that they both died prematurely, leaves a lot of space for the imagination. In terms of the movement, I try to not know how and if I've been influenced. It's important to remember that, as Americans, our notion of art is not one of reasoning through every element. We find a freedom also in not knowing.*