

First Collaboration

Even with all the beautiful and well-lit photographs of Drew Minter in my album from the early 80s, one of my favorites is neither posed nor well lit, caught as it was against the blank-wall of a Soho loft during a performance. Its soft focus and misty gray shadows caress his bare, sweaty, straining chest—planted feet, flying hair, face whipped to the side in a wrenched expression—a direct out-growth of his unrestrained voice leaping and diving through space. His hand partially covers his mouth--surprise, command, impetuous power? Are we witnessing a moment of irrevocable madness, or merely a delicious racing dive off the edge of sanity to soar out, far out into free air, only to land safely back on solid emotional footing a few minutes later? Either way, the skillful, intuitive performer in Drew invites us not to turn away, but to watch with an almost voyeuristic pleasure as he careens on the edge of...of...of what? A nervous breakdown? A crisis of gender identity? A celebration, perhaps, of a journey through despair, delight, and ecstasy?

But I need to take a step back, now, to tell the story. That startling dance theater piece wasn't actually my first collaboration with Drew. In the whole body of two creative artist's collaborative work, how do you identify the proper place for a piece with no other name but love?

Drew and I met early in the spring of 1980 in a rehearsal for a Baroque opera. Drew, freshly back from vocal studies in Vienna, was new to the early music ensemble Concert Royal which was producing the opera. He was cast in a small singing role. I was cast as part of the dance chorus. After a couple hours of our first full company rehearsal, we were all tired. When you're not used to it, executing the authentic, highly-stylized 18th century gestures and posturing in a way that looks natural and easy can be a struggle.

On our first rehearsal break, in that stuffy Soho loft, I noticed Drew go over to the window for fresh air—all blond brightness and youthful leanness. When I leaned on the window sill next to him, the unguarded smile he turned on me made me stumble over whatever stupid pick-up line I was about to attempt. Instead of impressing him with cool, sexy assessments of our rehearsal process, I started babbling to him about the small group of wacky singer/dancers in my own dance/theater company--fun and willing co-creators I'd gathered to help me build my own brand of body/voice theater. I went on and on about this obscure niche in the performing arts world where I felt at home. Without a pause for breath or comment, I expounded about the immersive theatrical experiences I was trying to create out of "found" and "truthful" threads of vocal and movement improvisation. And I probably even mentioned my collaboration with new music composer Geoff Wright, who was helping me structure dramatically viable performance tapestries woven from those slim threads. All of that spun out of me before we were called back fifteen minutes later

to our staging rehearsal of this Baroque opera with its highly ornamented and intricately layered musical language.

When the rehearsal finally ended, I shouldered the heavy leather dance bag I dragged with me everywhere and followed Drew out the door. His brilliant and inviting smile assured me of his interest and we ambled all the way across the West Village together, picking up slices of sizzling, gooey pizza on the way. From a perch at the end of a pier in the Hudson River, the inexorable slide of the estuary toward the ocean set the pace for our first real sharing. Personal histories and professional dreams filled the animated flow of conversation. Shoulders became saturated with the warmth of our leaning weight. Out there in that safe patch of public space, our tentative touch slid in and out of interlaced fingers, then began a slow but eager surveying of evenly toned bodies. Hands were followed by mouths. Lips left trails of wetness, licked off without a stammer or a blush. The courage of this public display of lusty attraction brought out beaming smiles and further stoked our craving for each other—and for room to romp in private.

After I screwed up my face and mumbled a quick description of the grungy one-bedroom apartment in the sketchy neighborhood in Brooklyn I shared then with two equally poor roommates, there was no question we would head to the clean efficiency on the Upper West Side he was subletting that month.

“Come on.” He said. “Let’s go grab the #1 train.”

He led the way, erotic urgency pulling us to the lovely sunset-washed studio. Much to my heart’s delight, our lust-play that evening tumbled into a deep pool of skin-grazing and soulful eye gazing. I couldn’t get enough of rubbing my face and chest and groin all over his smooth rippled belly. He wrapped himself around me in soft muscled embraces that wouldn’t let go.

From that first night, and as often as we could for the next month, I slow-danced all over his body, and he sang soft arias in my ears. Right from that beginning, we transmuted sex into both love and art. Lovemaking was really our first performance piece—art in place—beauty emerging moment by moment for an audience of two. We rooted an artistic, emotional and eventually spiritual connection in the skin-on-skin, body-to-body alchemy that created long-burning sweetness out of persistent pleasuring of flesh.

Our storybook beginning was interrupted for two painful months while I commuted every day to White Plains for a lucrative but boring venture into commercial musical theater, and Drew went back to Vienna for more vocal study. Only postcards kept us in touch while he was away, but we picked up where we had left off as soon as he was back in the country.

Both of us were still relatively new in New York, eager and fresh with our artistic curiosity. We were tempted out of bed for frequent tastes from the vast

smorgasbord of music, art, dance, and theater available every night of the week somewhere in the City. From downtown hole-in-the-wall Soho venues, to Broadway and Lincoln Center, we began sampling everything we could afford—standing room cheap seats, or better yet, comps from performer friends. When what we saw or heard was good, a quick glance in his direction or a squeeze from his hand confirmed it for me. Sparkle in his eyes amplified my excitement. We discovered and shared our passion for the most thrilling music, the most extraordinary voices, the most dynamic dancers, the most risk-taking performances. We shared heart-opening and mind-expanding conversations about what we saw and our excitement for this new relationship soared.

Our nights together grew more and more frequent. When we were in the same room, we were in constant touch. Neurochemistry was working its magic, of course, but we didn't know that. Even the emerging study of neuroscience had not yet identified how different qualities of touch and communication stimulated brain-body chemistry. Our mutually adoring gazes and languid caresses were bonding us in ways neither of us understood and certainly in ways we hadn't found with previous partners. We didn't care about why. We just wanted to see each other and be together as much as we could.

In August, my little company of singer/dancer/performers had been invited to take a suite of dances from our previous year's production, "Song Weavers," up to the Tanglewood Music Festival. This plum of an opportunity for my work to be shown in such a prestigious venue was only possible because of Geoff. He was up at Tanglewood for the summer as a young composer in residence and had been asked to present a piece of his work. He was proud of the musical results of his collaboration with me, and decided it would be impressive for that audience to show how the dances and the dancers' voices wove together with the electronic score. All I had to do was excerpt sections of that immersive theater piece, re-stage it for proscenium, and ready my troop to go up to the Berkshires for the weekend.

With some anxiety, I asked Drew to come along. Of course, I wanted him in my bed and by my side, but I really wanted Drew to be impressed with my work. I wanted him to see and feel what we were doing—what I was creating.

The notoriously snobby audience at Tanglewood was used to listening to high-brow classical music while enjoying chilled white wine and elaborate picnics on the grassy slope in front of the stage. But the movement of colorful costumes that broke up an otherwise somber performance of heady, electronic music woke them out of their stupor, and gave our little group (and Geoff's composition) a standing ovation that afternoon. Drew had paid even closer attention and was more than impressed. His gleaming smile when he came backstage at the end of the performance made my heart soar.

Filled with both joy and huge relief, I got the courage right there in the wings of that open-air stage to spring a question I'd been thinking about incessantly. I'd been

trying to figure out how to ask it throughout the weekend and the weeks leading up to it.

“Drew, I was wondering.” I took his hands and looked into his sweet, elated face. “Would you maybe be interested in possibly working with my company this fall on a new body/voice theater piece.” Not sure how to read his lifted eyebrows, I back-pedaled. “It shouldn’t be too involved time-wise. I can only afford studio space a couple afternoons a week. And I’ll do my best to work around the rehearsals and gigs you already have. I do a jigsaw puzzle of scheduling for the others, anyway.”

When he turned on his heel and walked a few steps away as if to give my question some deep consideration, my heart sank. My self-confidence was not yet built on solid experience nor grounded in a successful career, so I was easily thrown into a tailspin of doubt at every potential disappointment. But he didn’t leave me dangling long. True to the dramatic tendencies I would learn to admire, he whirled back around, rushed at me, and jumped into my arms for a hug, wrapping his legs around my waist. He pulled his head back just enough for me to see the impish, conspiratorial gleam in his eyes.

“Yes.” He whispered in my ear. “Of course, yes. I was hoping you would ask me.”

We sealed the deal, as broad and vague as it was, with an equally broad and lingering kiss. Neither of us knew exactly what we had agreed to. Perhaps, we understood even then that we needed to be working together, creating together, to fulfill the potential of the passionate connection constantly threatening to overtake us.

After dinner that evening, as the group of us meandered out to choose rocking chairs on the porch overlooking the Berkshires, Drew began to talk about a vocal piece he was intrigued with that might work as a theatrically staged performance piece.

“Of course, I’m interested.” I said. “But I need to hear it first. I don’t have enough musical training to make sense out of sight-reading a score.”

“I’m not sure even I can read this one. It’s Luciano Berio’s “Sequenza III.” It was written for a soprano, Berio’s wife, but because it’s scored in a completely unique way with no specific notes or time signatures, only relative pitches and special symbols for stops, trills, pops, hisses, and stuff, it can probably be sung by any voice. I think, anyway. But it’s one of the hardest and most mind bending unaccompanied solos I’ve come across. I’ve never heard it sung live, though.”

“I have,” said Geoff lazily, rocking on a chair next to ours, enjoying a welcome evening breeze. “It should really give you some musical chops, if it doesn’t drive you crazy first. And good luck deciphering the score.”

When we returned to the City, Drew ferreted out a copy, figured out how to read it, and line by line, taught it to himself. Even at the age of twenty-five, Drew was already a consummate musician, deeply educated in a wide variety of structures, harmonies, melodies, and styles of music—music of all eras, especially what was then and is still often lumped together as “Early Music”. It turned out that his unusual voice, ranging from the bottom notes of a baritone to the upper notes of a contralto, and his fearless, nothing-held-back approach to performing were perfect for this piece.

As soon as he was able to give me a taste of what it might sound like, we started staging it, snagging hours in a downtown studio I rented. I began to find the choreographic devices that would illustrate the flow from one part to the next and reveal the emotional beats hidden throughout the piece.

In rehearsals, Drew’s mood vacillated from commanding to insecure, depending on how confidently he could execute that part of the music. He was a perfectionist when it came to his singing. I never doubted that we would find a way to render this remarkable vocal tour-du-force as a fully staged theatrical piece. It was a perfect showcase for his multiple performing talents. And it also gave him the chance to explore outside the early music repertoire into which countertenors like him were often boxed.

The staging process sometimes uncovered an insecurity from a lack of formal dance training. He told me he felt out of his element whenever I asked him to stray too far into technical dance vocabulary. So I frequently asked him to show me the movement the music suggested to him, and then chose from the possibilities he came up with. As I had already discovered with the dancers in my company, and in my college production years before, pulling the best and strongest out of what a performer already owned excited me more than insisting they bend to a predetermined vision. There were times, even in rehearsal, when Drew’s simple, clear, but unstudied gestures brought me to tears. His finely tuned body, more beautifully proportioned and muscled than mine, moved with a natural grace that many trained dancers lacked. He took my movement coaching hungrily, digested it, and made it his.

The choreographic result, held solidly on course by his magnetic presence and vocal pyrotechnics, directed the viewer’s attention from the extremes of expression to the tiniest details of each gesture. His performances were so transparent they taught audiences to “see” the beauty, humor and pathos in the music. When I look now at the poorly lit photo from the performance that winter, it is his transparency I love. I was used to working with less gifted, less focused, less musical performers. Working with Drew on this piece exhilarated me, and I wanted more.