

JANE COMFORT'S AMERICA

by
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*“Art that cannot shape society and therefore also cannot penetrate the heart...is no art.”—
Joseph Beuys, 1985*

When the shamanic artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) declared in the 1970s that we are living in a time when performers have become politicians and politicians have become performers, it seemed that Beuys was identifying one of those cyclic moments in history that would soon give way. But here we are, twenty-five years on, and, if anything, the state of affairs Beuys described has deepened. Indeed, the idea that politicians have only slipped further into their actors' masks was the subject of the late Arthur Miller in *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, the 30th Annual Jefferson Lecture, which the esteemed playwright delivered shortly after George W. Bush's 2001 inauguration. (“We are ruled more by the arts of performance, by acting in other words, than anybody wants to think about for very long,” Miller excoriated official Washington.) But just as politicians have adopted the inauthenticity of acting and a grasping for celebrity as substitutes for a genuine commitment to public service, artists of all kinds have stepped into the breach to assume the mantle of community leaders, as activists and social critics.

Choreographer Jane Comfort entered the artworld just as Beuys was making his prescient pronouncement, and her development has been representative of socially conscious artists of the past quarter century. It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism has re-introduced “content” to the work of artists during that time, and certainly the zeitgeist is not to be denied. But the galvanizing force for the radicalization of art was certainly the Reagan Revolution, a phenomenon that dogged Comfort's first steps as a choreographer. As Reagan's election in 1980 began the inexorable dismantling of the social safety net that had been a profound force for equity in this country since the 1930s, as it mandated an about-face on the gains for social justice that had been achieved by minority populations, and as it declared a war on culture and art in response to the pluralism of cultural diversity, the radical nature of this political convulsion and its disastrous implications for a compassionate and open society were immediately apparent. Artists did indeed step in and assumed for themselves those roles a “streamlined” government had abrogated: as caretakers and healers of the distressed, the less fortunate, the ill, and the forgotten, and as spokespeople for democratic and pluralistic ideals. In response, artists became outraged and articulate critics of social and political policies that were aggravating inequality. They were also moved to action by the homophobic response to AIDS—it took Reagan seven years to publicly utter the word—an illness that was taking a disproportionate toll on the artistic community.

With her socially conscious artmaking, Jane Comfort has been on the front lines in all of these areas of dissent. In her work, the aptly-named Comfort has given voice and succor to the disaffected and marginalized: to drag queens, the homeless, gays and lesbians, the suppressed, the abused, the afflicted. She has taken to heart the idea that art is a place where we can enter the imaginations of others, and by doing so, develop compassion, empathy, and some degree of understanding for those who are different from us. Even at its wittiest, Comfort's work is a serious examination of those things that unite us as well as those things that separate us, and

how we can reconcile those states of being.

Jane Comfort's America is a true cross-section of this country. Unlike the fuzzily idealized images of *Leave It to Beaver* small-town America that dominate our political conventions and discourse, her work is inhabited by an infinitely diverse conglomeration: by Southern good old boys and by transvestite prostitute drug addicts, by superheroes and strippers, by congressmen and DJs, by drag kings and Southern belles, by society decorators and rapists, by hard-charging businessmen and struggling artists, and by people of every color, sexual orientation, and gender. In showing America unvarnished and gloriously mongrel, Comfort wrests from politicians the idea of just what an American—and certainly, what an American hero—is. In viewing those outside the mainstream as individuals rather than as stereotypes, Comfort's work acknowledges that America's strength lies in its diversity and that a compassionate view toward those unlike ourselves is the true basis of America's greatness.

In developing a form to contain these statements about breaching barriers of race, class, gender, and culture, Comfort has developed a new mode of performance whose structure is consonant with this content. Comfort has always been a “low walls” artist, dismissing disciplinary boundaries in form as she crosses cultural borders in her themes. Her work is an amalgam of dance, theater, language, sound, music, visual arts, storytelling, puppetry, gesture, and poetry.

This borderless state began very early in Comfort's career with her embrace of text. She calls language “the defining thing” in her work, and not only was she using text long before it became commonplace for choreographers to do so, but her sophistication in experimenting with the various ways that textual and gestural forms can intersect has kept her far ahead of the curve. From her initial forays of using language as a “melodic line” in accompaniment to movement, she has moved on to explore classic performance texts in movement terms, to write her own theater pieces, and to collaborate with poets, playwrights, and lyricists. Always, however, language exists in service to the idea of how it is a force for understanding and shaping human consciousness. And in her more recent work, often the language has been reduced to an isolated sound or word, employed as a disruption of silence, to achieve maximum resonance.

Over the last fifteen or so years of dancemaking, Comfort has aimed for the marriage of structure and meaning, and she has created a series of deeply reverberating works of political bite and poetic subtlety. Her breakthrough in extended form came in *Department*, her two-part examination of racial bigotry. A native Tennessean, Comfort used *Department: South* (1990) to expose the ugliness that lurks just under the surface of Southern politeness and gentility. She credits fellow Southerner Mark Dendy, who performed in this work, with giving her the courage not only to expose this offensiveness but also to view its perpetrators with compassion. It was Mark Russell, then-curator of P.S. 122, who encouraged her to look at the more subtle but equally destructive manifestations of Northern bigotry in *Department: North* (1991), which turned Comfort's attention to homophobia and misogyny, in addition to race.

Another breakthrough of a different sort came in Comfort's 1993 *Faith Healing*, a movement reconception of Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie*. In *Faith Healing*, Comfort created textual movement and gestural language to create a hybrid form of dance theater that was more than the sum of those two elements. While Comfort turned to a classic American drama for the underpinning story, she deconstructed Williams's plot and dialogue to excavate themes and ideas, such as homoeroticism and the sexual fantasies of person with a disability, that Williams

could not make explicit in 1944. In casting Dendy as Williams's *monstre sacre* Amanda Wingfield, Comfort also explored in earnest the gender bending that she had begun to examine in *Department*, and that was to become a preoccupation culminating in her next work.

S/he (1995) was an essay in gender behavior that incorporated Comfort's research into cross-dressing. Comfort developed a drag-king alter-ego, Jack Daniels, "a Charlie Manson wannabe from the trailer park." In her forays around New York as Daniels, Comfort became acutely aware of differences in male and female movement behavior and their attendant privilege and oppression. The work was also an enraged response to the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, in which congressmen treated respected legal scholar Hill as an hysterical fantasizer, barraging her with sexist and racist insinuations concerning her dating history, her sexual proclivities, and her psychological stability. Comfort transformed the hearing transcripts into passages for a gospel choir, and added text that highlighted the racial ugliness that drove the hearings. Her next work, *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous* (1996), was also an angry response to official malfeasance, this time to the havoc wreaked by the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress and the hijacking of the national social agenda by the radical far right in its war on the poor and on artists. As she had with *S/he*, Comfort had only to let politicians—Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole, Bill Clinton, and Pat Robertson—supply a text that was more satirical than any scriptwriter could have invented.

Comfort's recent work finds the political in the personal, as it focuses on how social attitudes and conditions create the contexts for our lives. *Underground River* (1998) is a poetic exploration of the world of the disabled and, by metaphorical implication, of the creative mind. Still, even in its psychological delicacy, it is not so far from the broad lampooning of *Three Bagatelles*; for in its defense of the special insight achieved by the artist there is an answer to those right-wing politicians who characterize the federal government's presence in the arts as aid to social parasites. In Comfort's canon, *Persephone* (2004), based on the Greek myth, seems even more at odds, on its surface closer in spirit to Martha Graham's Jungian explorations than to Comfort's customary socially-activist work. Yet, here again, we see an artist exploring forms and ideas that give resonant voice to our contemporary nightmares. That this involves mining the ancient Western heritage for source material is really no contradiction at all, as what Comfort finds in Persephone's story is a guidebook for learning to survive profound psychological and social upheaval.

In her activist stance, Comfort conceives of "Art as a Verb" (to use the title of a 1989 show of politically conscious art mounted by the Studio Museum of Harlem). That is, in using every means of communication at her disposal—movement, language, visual elements, and music—Comfort brings authenticity and commitment to her voice of resistance. In engaging on the front lines of the Culture Wars over two decades, she has established her bona fides as cultural worker and cultural warrior. In simultaneously creating work of deeply metaphorical implication that is resonant with layers of meaning, Comfort also establishes her bona fides as a profound artist.