

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Magda

Shine Bright Like a Magda

by Mira Treatman

In a quest to reach new audiences for performing arts in Philadelphia, [Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) are joining forces and exploring how dance writing and discourse can provide new perspectives on theater. Beginning May 2018, tD writers have been lending their varied backgrounds, interests, and approaches to criticism to professional works of theater in Philadelphia. Let us know what you think in the comments!

“Nobody is as radical as they say they are,” Magda San Millan, known also as simply Magda, declared minutes into *feral wild girl child*. The autobiographical solo chronicling her experiences as artist-in-residence at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia oncology unit had a self-stated goal of “abandon and mortal arrival.” The subjects of her ambitious opus were her vocation as an artist and terminally ill children, but *feral* was mostly devoid of typical “artist as savior” or “cancer kid” narratives. The stories were tenderly told as first-person accounts, often through improvised monologues.

Magda performed for an audience of twelve in her cozy studio at the too-cool-to-be-a-school BOK Building, the site of the former Edward W. Bok Technical School. The studio’s size was comparable to a hospital room, anchored by white walls and floors. There were striking connections between the site Magda referenced, a pediatric oncology ward, and the site Magda was performing in. Bok was one of twenty-three public schools that closed in 2013 and is now used for a range of private enterprises. The premature deaths in Magda’s show and the school’s complicated closure poetically conflated death and the foreshortening of childhood.

Early in *feral* Magda took on the radical act of calmly and deliberately inserting a nasogastric tube through her nostril down her esophagus. Many children dealing with severe nausea as a side effect of chemotherapy get nourishment solely through a feeding tube. She offered that we could “look away” as she gagged inserting the tube because “it’s not a test.” Many audience members averted their gaze as she suffered.

While at CHOP, Magda had pushed an art supply cart to each room to work one on one with the children. In *feral*, she shared her disappointment with the limiting popsicle sticks and simple art kits. Her desire was to give the kids much more, which stemmed from a question she asked, channeling a dying child: “what if there is no color in the afterlife?” This basic notion that only here and now the children could have color was haunting.

Magda took this further in *feral* by showing what would happen if the children could have used the art supplies in the hospital to the fullest, wildest extent. The Chipmunks’ [cover of Bruno Mars’ Uptown Funk](#) blasted as Magda painted the white wall using the entirety of her body and full inventory of jewel tone paints. She unleashed a ferocity of movement, flinging color as if her life depended on it.

Magda declared that it was time for her to do what she was trained not to do in her theater and dance education. A karaoke track thumped on and she launched into a stirring rendition of [Rihanna’s “Diamonds,”](#) a favorite on the oncology unit. She glued gold glitter to her forehead and perched a skull atop her head like a bizarrely regal fascinator. Despite pretending to be tone deaf and employing a flighty goofball attitude, Magda maintained a level of professionalism throughout the performance art karaoke melee that displayed her training and sincerity.

A little prematurely, Magda remarked, “Well, that’s all I’ve got, it’s the end,” and then presented a glass trophy, missing an engraving, to herself. She asked us if we had any engraving ideas for the blank award. The ironic prop suddenly appeared very heavy in the artist’s hands, like an unmarked gravestone. This scene was emblematic of the millennial self-congratulatory disease, which is said to have originated in kindergartens ripe with participation awards. Magda responded that “death is imminent” for the oncology unit kids, “so say nice things about me, I’m gonna die.” Suddenly Rihanna’s lyrics from the earlier karaoke routine crystalized:

Palms rise to the universe, as we moonshine and molly
Feel the warmth, we’ll never die
We’re like diamonds in the sky

... Shine bright like a diamond
Shine bright like a diamond
Shine bright like a diamond
We’re beautiful like diamonds in the sky

[feral wild girl child](#), Magda, BOK, Sept. 5 - 30.

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