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Photo: Rachel Neville

An Interview with Iquail Shaheed Part 1: Black Love and Tenderness on Stage

by Mira Treatman

Ahead of Dance Iquail's Art Thrives from Black Lives: An Artistic Rally, I interviewed community leader, executive artistic director, dancer, professor, and rally organizer Iquail Shaheed. Part 1: Black Liberation is a series of edited excerpts from our conversation on Zoom. Part 2: The Future of the Dance Institution *can be found here.*

Attend this peaceful artistic rally on June 27 from 10am to 3pm outside of the Community Education Center.

Mira Treatman: You've been combining dance and social justice for a long time. None of "this moment" is new for you. What was the impetus for organizing the protest?

Iquail Shaheed: It's a very Philly thing because both moments are happening at the same time. There's the murdering of Black lives; that isn't new but it's highly visible. It's a national front: George Floyd in Minnesota; Iyana Dior, who's a Black trans woman from Minnesota who was beaten; Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia; Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta. There were people murdered by the cops in Philly. Black men murdered by the cops in Philly, and they never got the same recognition. So, as a Black man, that's very much on me and on the hearts of the Black men I work with in my new piece Public Enemy.

At the same time, the arts community is going bust. If the arts lose funding and Black lives don't matter and are murdered… [my] organization is going down. Now is the perfect opportunity to illustrate Dance Iquail's brand of social justice through dance. It's not just about the choreographic idea, but ultimately how the arts live at this intersection of people, people's lives, and creative self-expression.

MT: How did you get started in working with youth, with being a leader?

IS: "How did I get started?" is an interesting question because I don't think there was ever a starting point. If you care about people you're always working with people; it's the industry that labels those people. "Oh those people are youth, those people are adults." I've always worked with any and everybody. I was a drill team leader as a kid. Philly has a big drill team culture. My task was to direct the younger members of the team. That was always what I was doing. I never stopped. It just migrated and changed to different forms and different opportunities.

MT: I would love to hear more about your piece *Public Enemy*.

IS: I got a National Dance Project grant in 2019 from New England Foundation for the Arts to do a large-scale work about the societal issues that Black men experience; specifically around policing, mass incarceration, and racialized violence. How ironic, right? I've been working with a team of collaborators to work with men who had been incarcerated or who identify with some aspect of incarceration, whether it was an uncle or a family member and they had to visit them. We used the lyrics of Public Enemy's music as the through-line to investigate, to ask the questions, and the group would respond. This allowed us to germinate these ideas from personal experiences. From there we worked with the men to craft all of this material. We worked on how to make movement. We asked how they speak about it. How do they vision it? Then our team of collaborators worked with that material to create this evening length piece. It's really about showing the love of Black men and the humanity of Black men, specifically in a situation like incarceration. People conflate Black men, incarceration, criminality, and bestiality. We disrupt that.

We presented an excerpt of *Public Enemy* at APAP and IABD, and we got standing ovations everywhere. This was in January before George Floyd. We knew about Philando Castile. People were writing, doing pieces about Alton Sterling or Tamir Rice or Trayvon Martin or Sandra Bland, and putting those on stage. At a moment when those narratives [about Black death] were all on stage, we came in, and it was just about love and tenderness. We put an image of Black men of different sizes and shapes dressed in purple, which is a symbol of royalty in African cultures. We have them touch one another and catch each other, falling from distances. We put ourselves at risk: literal risk and performative risk. I'm standing on center stage and all of the dancers are offstage. I'm falling, and in real time they have to catch me. We throw each other up in the air. It connected people because it's not an image we're used to seeing; where all Black men are just in support and love and tenderness with each other. The narrative was all of us dying. Our piece wasn't that narrative. It was us thriving. Everybody's still talking about it.

This is an illustration of our practice of social justice. We came up with the piece in six days but we didn't go into the process to create a piece. We went into the process to heal each other. It's like an art therapy session that resulted in the piece. Every time we watch it we are reliving our therapy session. People are seeing our therapy session without knowing that's what it is. It wasn't a piece; it was just a result of deep desire to build a bond with each other that was love. It was just love.

That's what I want funders to understand about our work. It absorbs everybody in that unconscious emotional place, which we say that art is supposed to be. For us, it's not divorced from the deep way we need to work with people. To try to get one without the other, it's just gonna fail for us, and that's our model of dance and social justice.

MT: So, what is next for *Public Enemy*?

IS: Coronavirus has put a damper on us, but we just got another grant to continue. That will allow us to do things virtually. I'm trying to partner with the Dornsife Center at Drexel and the Mural Arts Restorative Justice program. We'll build a community cohort and start doing this work even deeper while paying them. We're training them in theatre production: laying down floor, building the stage,

changing the gels. Our eventual goal is to have Eastern State Penitentiary partner with us once we're in a safe phase, and allow us to premiere the work there. If any readers from those institutions are inspired after reading this, they should reach out to me. The Painted Bride is our biggest community presenter. After that, we'll take it on tour.

MT: How can our readers follow you and support your work?

IS: Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. The biggest thing is donate, donate, donate. Donate funds at a considerable level because we're on the verge of collapse and unable to do this work for our constituents who need to eat. While we're appreciative and won't turn away any help, we are advocating that we need considerable funds. If you know foundations interested in supporting social justice and the arts, please mention us to them.

MT: Any last thoughts you'd like to share?

IS: I try to take a breath; this is always the moment. The biggest thing I say is that people see my life and say, "You're doing so much, you're doing so many great things." And I say, thank you, it's really not me, it's really divine. It's really a blessing of God that's been put in me to do this work, not for myself but for other people, specifically in Mantua coming from similar situations who may not have the ability or resources to have media attention or be on boards. So I speak for them. Anyone who supports me is supporting them. As Maya Angelou said, "I count as one but I stand here as ten thousand." I really want people to know that their support of me in this work, while I'm appreciative, I'm behind ten-thousand people, and they're behind ten-thousand people. Anyone supporting me is supporting them.

Interview with Iquail Shaheed of Dance Iquail, June 25, Zoom.

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