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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Courtesy of Artist

Naomi Tanner Creates Dance Theater to Feel Alive

by Joy-Marie Thompson

I'm waiting in a small cafe in Brooklyn, NY when [Naomi Tanner](#), wearing a lilac purple top and jacket paired with hot pink shadow on her eyes and cheekbones, walks in to greet me. She looks like spring in this inconsistent winter weather. She is so incredibly gracious that when I offer to buy her any drink she wants, she declines before settling for a regular drip. The self-described “gender rebellious” transdisciplinary artist who insisted on hearing what I've been up to before we began the interview, has been making solo work for some time now. I spoke to Naomi Tanner before she entered [The Brick](#), a Brooklyn based theater where RETURN, her evening length solo show about virtual therapy, heartbreak, and breaking patterns was set to premiere.

Joy-Marie Thompson: I think it's really brave that you do solo work. Correct me if I'm wrong but, RETURN, is your third solo show for the stage, right?

Naomi Tanner: Yes! That is true... that is true...

JT: I do my research.

NT: You got me there! [Laughs] That's good to know actually.

JT: How did RETURN come about?

NT: It started at Arts on Site with the performance of my first solo, SESSION TWELVE. It was towards the end of 2020 and I was going through this breakup. It was such a casual relationship but it felt so devastating for really no reason at all. So, I made SESSION TWELVE and it was this fifteen minute long piece of emotion framed by an online therapy session. After I made that piece I was like, “Oh, therapy is like 45 minutes to an hour... that could be a whole show. If I wanted it to be. That's how RETURN started to come into

realization.

JT: Did you base it off of your own personal experience with therapy?

NT: Oh yeah, I've been in and out of therapy since highschool. But when I jumped back into it, it was still pretty early in the pandemic so, it was all over Zoom. That was the space I was in at that time. I've moved therapists but I've stuck with Zoom therapy which is... it's interesting. It's just an interesting experience every time. I don't know how much longer I'm gonna stick with Zoom therapy. I feel like there is just a little bit more inherent distance. Emotionally and physically.

JT: Would you be able to share with me how you identify yourself? Does it relate to your work? I'm sure it does but maybe it doesn't!

NT: I identify, currently, as transfemme, and... yeah. That is my current identity that I am living with. [Pauses] My identity influences the work. That sense of gender euphoria, I am constantly chasing in my work. It's a space for me to experience that. So, that doesn't always come out in super forward ways like: I'm trans and this is my trans life. Like, it's a little bit more subtle than that. I don't like my identity to be the center of every single experience that I live. But it is always under the surface.

JT: What prompted you to start creating your own work?

NT: There are so many possible answers to this. One is that I've always done this. Creating skits and dances has always been something I've done. Both out of passion and also boredom. Another is that I hold great love, intrigue, and passion for all the mediums I incorporate in my projects. Pursuing a traditional performance career didn't feel like an effective way for me to give proper energy to all my passions. The last one I'll offer is that there is a lot of freedom in gender expression/exploration I feel when creating my own work that I never really felt when I was a performer in other artists' practices. Avoiding director/choreographer expectations of gender performance, both in and around the work, I think allows me to more easily focus on creating captivating, insightful, and rigorous work.

JT: You are a transdisciplinary artist. You choreograph, perform, write and you are a composer as well for RETURN.

NT: Yeah [laughs]! I work with a lot of different mediums. This definitely comes from my background in theater, mime, and dance but also my philosophy as well: every medium is connected and comes from a universal place. In the mixing of my mediums... I don't know! I mean, I don't wanna sound like I'm doing something super prolific but, it almost creates its own medium everytime I combine one with another. So it's just this idea of transforming a medium outside of what's traditionally thought to be.

JT: Doing solo work is so brave, I have to say that again. I tried making a solo. I planned on choreographing it...I planned so much. I ended up doing something very different. It was a very scary process for me and the scariest part was showing up everyday.

NT: It's hard to find motivation. When you have other people's motivation to feed off of, it's easier, I think, to feel a connection to why you're doing this. This act of sharing is inherent when you are collaborating with other people. To share with yourself and to have that constant dialogue with yourself is like... it's just a lot. Showing up is the most challenging part. I have to tell myself that I'm not doing this for nothing and that this is worth it.

JT: What is worth it?

NT: The practice. The practice is useful for- obviously getting to share it with other people but [pauses]... this might sound corny but, this is why I am alive. I work in the service industry. I'm on my feet a lot. I serve people in a very transactional way. So, to do something that is more in dialogue with the world. Yeah... Creating this work connects me to something greater and keeps me going. I feel like this is what I am supposed to be doing. I think that's what keeps me reinvesting in myself. And I will say that, being in a really consistent solo practice for about 2 years now makes me really excited to collaborate with other people.

JT: You're ready [laughs]?! You're a little over it now, huh?

NT: Yeah a little bit [laughs]. The last work I presented, BIG CITY SLAY (2022)- that work still excites me. I feel like there is more work to do with that. But I wanna do something with other people.

JT: What would be your advice to a young artist?

NT: Do your own thing. Do what feels important. Be kind to yourself and others. Patience is a virtue.

RETURN, Naomi Tanner, The Brick, February 28- March 3, 2023

*This interview was edited and condensed for length and clarity.

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