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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Aja Nadi

Un-Othering Our Gardens: "What Seeds Are You Planting?"

by Caitlin Green

Potted plants and cardboard-cut grass cradled the marley stage at the [Icebox Project Space](#) as [The Other Gardeners'](#) co-authoring performers [Colby Calhoun](#) and [Micah Lat](#) of [Very Good Dance Theatre](#) immersed the audience in their garden. In an informal approach to performance, the two were in constant conversation as they navigated through starting cues for choreography, pauses for technical adjustments, and transitions from one score to the next. Rather than yielding to traditional performance etiquette or the façade of seamless synchrony that results from well-rehearsed, perfectly timed cues, they took the more organic route and brought interactions that are normally reserved for behind-the-scenes, to the foreground. They coordinated with one another by casually checking readiness and partnering through decision-making out loud and in real time.

Did I mention they were naked for the entire show? Bare bodied and unperturbed, Lat and Calhoun maintained an engaged presence that cultivated a growing garden for play and intimacy to develop through a collection of dances, SIMS character-building, poetry and storytelling. They welcomed audience members to contribute in subtle ways which created a sense of reciprocity and togetherness. Sometimes they asked for assistance... "can someone set a timer for four minutes?" Or for a volunteer to read the scrolling text that was projected on the wall behind them.

Despite that they were unclothed for the entire work, non-physical intimacy triumphed the piece in the form of care, consideration and humor. Micah and Colby's relationship was flirtatious, patient, sarcastic, and honest. They expressed frustration with one another since Colby had dropped Micah's tablet before the show—a mistake that some might consider a tragedy. Though the tablet was an integral component to a special solo moment for Micah, it became only a minor inconvenience that could never interfere with their ability to validate each other's humanity. Viewers witnessed moments of physical tenderness when Colby and Micah would embrace or gently gesture using touch mid-conversation, and during dramatic lip-synced dances to R&B ballads. But the intimacy lived loudest in the conversational nature of the work - both amongst the co-stars' relationship and in their ongoing connection to the audience. Micah

pulled a chair downstage to sit close to the audience and shared a story with us about their grandmother who faced racial discrimination by the State. Embodying the feeling and impulse they described that they sometimes reckon with in the midst of this ancestral history, their body stiffened, writhed, clenched, toughened and twitched with angst, so much so that the movement pulled them to the edge of their chair. It evoked a familiar agony and fury that travels through stories and bloodlines of Black lineages and revives the feral urgency of resistance. A strain of intimacy lived in this moment through Lat's storytelling and confiding.

The nonchalance in public nudity that was demonstrated throughout this work was refreshing. The lack of attention to the fact that genitals were exposed at almost all times made nudity feel ordinary and irrelevant. To witness intimacy show up in so many ways that had nothing to do with sex was a remedial moment. And it could be an answer to one of the question's Colby and Micah left us with... "What seeds are you planting?" "How will you get there?"

"Let's grow together."

[*The Other Gardeners*](#), Very Good Dance Theatre, Icebox Project Space, Cannonball Festival, Philly Fringe Festival, Sept. 2, 9, 25.

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