

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Naomieh Jovin, courtesy of BlackStar Projects

Venus Flytrap: A goddess bound to this earth

by Noel Price-Bracey

Bright tapestries flap in the wind as I look out at the water. Slowly, a faceless figure emerges from behind fragmented trees; stalking forward, one limb bound by a fleshtight yellow and bark-brown garment, a “bodysuit” as called by creator Joiri Minaya. The figure's unbound limb is stitched to the garment, offering organic asymmetry. Another figure appears in the distance, followed by another and another. Each long approach towards the audience feels as old as the garden grounds. I wait in anticipation for the next figure to arrive.

[Joiri Minaya's](#) textile performance dissolves the boundaries between dancer and costume. Long-time collaborators Joiri Minaya and curator [Dessane Lopez Cassell](#) “reflect on the intertwined legacies of freedom, extraction, and ecology in North America's oldest surviving botanical garden.” [Venus Flytrap](#) presented at Bartram's Gardens by [BlackStar Projects](#) is a multidisciplinary/multimodal marvel leading lessons in community. A self-led charge to “examine Philadelphia's colonialist horticultural practices and the cultural significance of plants for Native and Black people of the Americas, especially the Caribbean.”

Alongside this duo, interdisciplinary artist [Jonathan Gonzalez](#) worked with Minaya in rehearsal to ensure the performance, featuring angel shanel edwards, Cory Seals, Kingsley Ibeneche, Marguerite Hemmings, Mawu Ama Ma'at Gora, and Gonzalez himself, correlated seamlessly to the plant print bodysuit, blankets and canopies that dress the natural landscape. Each bodysuit was printed by [In Vogue Studios LTD](#), the blankets in partnership with [ITA Leisure](#), as were the canopies with [The Fabric Workshop and Museum](#). In continued collaboration, sewing team Serenity Lopez and Russle Thayer worked on the bodysuits designed by Joiri. Gonzalez's work “engages with how the historical passage of geographies and communities are entangled.” a likely pairing for the intricacies of the *Venus Flytrap* performance.

The six figures stand motionless in front of the audience, fabric rippling in the wind. Unwavering, the group relinquishes urgency with loud stillness and refusal to “do something.” Time passes like winter, 20 minutes or so. One performer signals with a breath cue, the

others unzip their flamboyant (ornate) camouflage, shed their first skin, and blossom into psychedelic May colors. Spring has arrived, and the earth is enlivened. A chorus of consent chimes low like the heavy footsteps in the soundscape designed by Joiri's younger sister, Melina Minaya. "Mums" and "un-huns" grow as the performers lie body on body, squishing under and through the legs and torsos of one another in support lifts and conjoined holds. The performers continue to move like collective matter, a tangled bundle of earthlike humanity. The electronic soundscape slips away, and the volume of play increases. Dancers unravel from one another, expanding wide into the audience, crawling, rolling, slithering, and frolicking amongst the people, repeating rolls, offering piggyback rides, and mirroring spectators. One performer in a green bodysuit is caught in an athletic game of follow the leader with a toddler. The laughter erupting from the performers bounces off the trees and into the hearts of the audience. Spirits of children, mothers, partners, and friends alike are filled with the priceless treasure joy brings. Audible cues sound off for new moves, and the free-play continues.

Eventually, each performer makes their way back to the proscenium front. Their vocals soften, the energy in the garden responds. The dancers trickle left, retreating to a wide mother tree whose thick outstretched limbs welcome the performers under the brightly hung canopies. They climb back into stillness. The ceremony is concluding, yet the audience remains rightfully silent, uncertain if more is coming. Time passes again like winter, and the dancers shift into pedestrian beings, removing their faceless hoods. They hug one another slowly and stickily, celebrating the collective willingness to "leave it all." They return to the audience, hands clasped in a formal line, and bow for the work they have just done.

Laughter is tradition—medicine for the marginalized. Jonathan Gonzalez and Joiri Minaya excellently transmit the ethos of each plant's medicinal power into choreography. Every slip, slither, quake, and joyful bounce a link to the castor plant, snake plant, hibiscus (sorrell), or sweetgrass. This work rooted in heritage boasts of healing and restoration. I wonder about the significance of this performance staged on the 50-acre garden; 10 more acres than the 40 acres promised to Black folks in the alleged end of slavery. I swim through the atrocious rabbit hole of Native land grabs and the necessity of preservation. I acknowledge the depth of labor expended during the three years of research prior to this installation and urge you to join the conversation. Seek out the work of Joiri Minaya as it is not one thing but many: a radical happening – a call to return to practice and an invitation to rest.

[Joiri Minaya Venus Flytrap](#), BlackStar Projects, Bartram's Garden, May 29-June 29.

Article Page Image Description: *Three dancers triangulate amidst a group of ground-seated spectators on blankets and lawn chairs. Two dancers dressed in green, one moving through a joy-filled lung. The third dancer in purple stands tall, arm relaxed, pointing in the direction of one green-suited performer.*

Homepage Image Description: *Right slanted grass supports two performers escaping from a fleshtight yellow and bark-brown garment, a "bodysuit." One performer lies on the ground, horizontal to the left of the standing figure, with an arm extending upwards.*

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