

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Mawiyah Dowd

Choking on Hope

by Julius Ferraro

[Sam Tower](#), choreographer and producer of 2015's dark, choreographic fem-noir Fringe hit 901 Nowhere Street, meets me at the Society Hill Good Karma Cafe to discuss her new project with performance collaborative [Plant Me Here, I'd rather choke than be a quitter](#), being developed through a residency with [1fiftyone gallery + art space](#). Sam's hair, previously bleach-white, is freshly dyed sky-blue. She speaks passionately in long, seamless sentences about building hype, choking on hope, and developing a fantasy world for performance.

Julius Ferraro: In the nine months before you premiered 901 Nowhere Street you built an incredible amount of hype around it, making it one of the most anticipated Fringe shows. Can you talk about how you did that?

Sam Tower: I think what happened with *Nowhere Street* was that all of the elements that went into making that show fed each other and helped to promote the project as a whole. We made this film, for example, with a companion artist named Tess Kunik, that we would eventually screen at a benefit, but then it turned into its own expression that was based on the project and lived as its own striking content.

We're constantly creating new content, which is the key, I think—creating new things for people to eat that are tasty. And making those auxiliary performances and experimenting outside the medium of theater and dance directly taught us a lot about the piece. For example, with [the film Tess just made](#) for *I'd rather choke than be a quitter*, the way she edited it, taught me a lot about how we can approach the structure of the piece with overlapping images and overlapping time continuums.

JF: I saw a fragment of I'd rather choke at Scratch Night a few months ago. It has a distinctive, hyperactive visual style. Where did the concept of this repetitive choking, wheezing, doubling over, come from?

ST: "I'd rather choke than be a quitter" is a lyric from a Shakai Mondai song, the one that's in the part that you saw at Scratch Night. The piece is dealing with death and body departure in a maybe not obvious way, people leaving each other, or people being remembered by each other. "I'd rather choke than be quitter" is partially about being so stubborn when you're fighting with your loved ones. It unpacks to me both as passionate stubbornness in relationships but also to keep living. People have an instinctual desire to kind of choke through the thing and survive rather than give up and quit.

When I'm making work I'm obsessed with the idea that people want to transform their bodies or their space or the times that they're living in. I feel, on the inside of this piece, that the bodies are trying to escape themselves. I'd rather choke is like an obsessive need to escape time and space.

JF: Nowhere Street, which you worked on constantly for nine months last year, was very narrative compared to work I've seen of yours before. When I saw I'd rather choke, with its violent, repetitive movements, it felt like you were throwing that off.

ST: Let's make a super surreal, super fantasy body piece, where we get to be mythological creatures, we get to make up this fake mythology and deliver it to people in a saturated manner, in beautiful, saturated lighting, and gorgeous electronic music. And let's not worry about computing as people having people desires. Those deer people, they aren't men, and they aren't women, and they aren't going for things that men and women people really go for.

JF: I know that in previous projects you have worked very closely with your sound designers to direct their work. With I'd rather choke, how are you, the dancers, and the sound designer working together to create a coherent piece?

ST: Last night we had a rehearsal with the dancers and the musician, Shakai Mondai. She was improvising to scores that we were making physically, and tonight she'll be rehearsing on her own. I find it helpful to break it up because it's sort of impossible to do both at all times. We have to go back and forth between them.

I think it's important to make work separately. It's important to make music that wasn't based on the dance, and make dance that is not timed or influenced by the music, and then put them together and not have them line up. We did that a little bit with Nowhere Street, but rhythmically everything was very purposeful.

I actually have to go to this rehearsal tonight and make sure that that's not what's happening. Really easily two things can happen: it becomes like chocolate icing on top of the chocolate cake, where you have slow graceful movement and slow graceful sound, or else everything feels like it happens one step behind something else. The dancers do something and then the music responds, or the musicians set the tone and the dancers fall into it. I want them to reveal something in each other without it feeling reactive.

I'd rather choke than be a quitter, Sam Tower + Ensemble with Plant Me Here, Shakai Mondai, and Sam Whalen, 1fiftyone gallery + art space, March 4rd through the 8th with a First Friday reception on March 4. brownpapertickets.com/event/2498624

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January 29, 2016