

Feminist Performance Festival at Northwestern University**Interview****Holly Hughes, Rhodessa Jones and Lenelle Moïse****With Jill Dolan****Date of interview: 5/20/2011**

Jill Dolan: Thank you so much. I'm very happy to be here. I want to thank Patrick, Ann and Ramón for the invitation and also for doing this work. It's important to devote time to feminist performance in this day and age, so I'm really happy to be part of this whole project. . . . There are many different things we can talk about today. I thought we might start with the question of feminism. Do you call yourself a feminist? Is the label meaningful to you in terms of your practice? Are there other labels you prefer? I know a lot of artists prefer not to label their work at all, but I'm curious how you situate yourself around this issue. Anyone want to start?

RJ: The piece I'm going to do Saturday night -- *Big Butt Girls, Hardheaded Women* -- I made it almost 20-22 years ago. I made the piece because I was inspired by my work with incarcerated women -- which was based on interviews and inspired by Anna Deavere Smith -- talking to women inside and making a piece. I was invited to the Women and Theater Program annual convention in Boston. They wanted to work with women who were working in institutions like jail. I made this piece for that particular event, and then when I returned home, it already had caused a big stir across the country. When I got back to the San Francisco county jails, they already were talking about this piece I had made. Some men from the jail came to me -- the educational facility -- and said, "Would you be willing to show this piece, *Big Butt Girls*, to the community as a way to introduce yourself in" something I had called "living on the outside"? I was going to be working with men and women from the work-furlough program. I said, "You have to remember it's a feminist theater piece." They said, "We'll remember."

[Laughter]

For my very first show, they brought me 70 men. 70 men watched *Big Butt Girls* in a public performance.

I said “feminist” because I wanted it understood it was going to be from a woman’s perspective and a woman’s voice, so that was where “feminist” worked. Most of the time I think of myself as a womanist. When my daughter, who is 46, gets upset with me, she says, “Oh, mom, you’re a feminist.” It’s like, That’s supposed to make me understand how I’m a little kooked. “You’re a feminist.”

HH: I came to art making, really, as a feminist. I went to an alternative feminist art school. I can’t believe 30-something years ago the women who ran the Heresies Collective in New York for quite a number of years -- who were artists and scholars and activists and made this amazing magazine -- felt education really was the link between our practice and our political beliefs and donated their time to start The New York Feminist Art Institute. Feminism had such cultural power The New York Feminist Art Institute was featured in all the papers and politicians came to the opening, even though we didn’t have any tables or chairs.

[Laughter]

I was new to New York and I didn’t know the trash was very good. Who needed the store when you had the streets? But, probably, if you had asked me this 20 years ago, I would have been aware of all the problems of feminism, particularly around pornography and the sensorium. I would have been, “Yes,” but with an eye roll. Of course today -- the spectacular week of men behaving badly with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the head of the IMF [Dominique Strauss-Kahn], which I think stands for “I am fucked” --

[Laughter]

and then the story in *Psychology Today*. Do people know about this story in *Psychological Today*? The story about some guy who got research funded to have his ratings system of women, so it’s already rating women and their attractiveness, but it’s all stacked to have the idea why, scientifically, African-American women are not as attractive, so that’s bad enough, but then it’s a cover story in *Psychology*

Today. This week I am particularly a feminist.

[Laughter]

Particularly after I got my first adult job at the age of 46 after being a waitress and a temp worker, and then a freelance artist, oddly enough, which allowed me to be a feminist queer person because nobody paid any more attention to me than a person with a real job. Then it was, like, “Oh yeah, this is still going on.”

JD: Lenelle?

LM: I’m comfortable with the word “feminist.” I’m more comfortable with the word “womanist.” I am a poet, so I recognize these are words. I really get frustrated sometimes when I go to a feminist circle or conference and the discussion stops with whether or not young women in the room are calling themselves feminists and honoring the feminists who came before. It seems to be a generational conversation, but it stops there. It’s always, “Why aren’t you calling yourself a feminist?” That’s what makes me uncomfortable because it’s a stagnant point and feminism to me is about doing, so if we’re just talking, that’s a removed, easy, passive discussion. So yes, I’m comfortable with the words, but now what?

JD: Right. That’s a very good point. I’m thinking too from all your remarks about how much this word and what it means has changed over time both for all of us and for the culture. I’m wondering, How at this point does or doesn’t feminism enhance or make possible your larger goals as an artist? What are your larger goals as an artist? How do politics in general inform your goals as an artist? Go ahead, Holly.

HH: Um.

[Laughter]

Yeah, get the solo. One quick thought is in 30 years it's a lot easier -- in certain circumstances, although not necessarily in the place where I work -- to say, "I'm gay" or "I'm a lesbian" or whatever -- "a fucking dyke" -- whatever it is, depending on my mood ring

[Laughter]

than it is to say, "I'm a feminist." At the same time, queer politics has gotten bogged down to whether you're LGBT or you're gay or do we have enough letters? These are important -- we're writers -- these are important, but everything stopped there. A political reading of situations is present in every moment of our lives. Like a visual reading -- like readings and interpretations and ways of understanding every other moment -- thinking about gender and sexuality and other political realities is present in our daily actions and to say *not* also is a political act, so that's something that's very present for me.

RJ: I remember the meetings in San Francisco on Valencia Street -- feminist meetings -- and men (crazy, truck-driving, straight, basically white guys) who would hear about a meeting and attempt to disrupt a meeting. I am 62 years old, so I remember. I would say to women, "My brothers are going to come," because my mother would say to my brothers, "You go in there and get your sister after ten o'clock," and having women want to argue this was not political with me (my brothers coming to get me). My mother would say, "If them white people going crazy over there, you go in there and get your sister out of there."

[Laughter]

They said, "He's your brother, he's a man and he's a male figure." I said, "No, let my brother through," and then I let my brother, Gus, come. Her is six-five and 300 pounds and nobody can stop him.

[Laughter]

That was one of the first things that really dawned on me about where we were with feminism, who it's

for, who gets to wear it, its flavor, how it fits into my existence and being told there was something wrong with me because I still associated with my brothers. At the same time, Alice Walker introduced the word “womanist.” All women bleed. I remember being in London -- oh, this was 20-25 years ago -- and running through the airport trying to catch my plane. An English woman comes up to me -- an English rose -- and says, “Darling, you have a spot on your skirt.” “Oh, my God, a spot on my skirt.” Which was very feminist to me because she said, “Come, come, come, I’ll help you.” She escorts me into the restroom and I say, “Anybody got a Tampax?” Every woman in the bathroom --

[Laughter]

Pakistani, African, everybody -- had sponge, cotton and twine.

[Laughter]

I thought, This is feminist, this is feminist to me. Nobody said, “Oh, girl, please.” No, it was like, “Oh, darling,” and everybody was willing to help me get the stain out of my skirt, so it’s that basic to me. Even when I talk to incarcerated women, I go there because, as you pointed out, the word “feminist” has been diminished and even in a population like jail don’t nobody want to hear that. That’s slang.

I also remember Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. I’ve still gotten a lot of trouble by saying “vagina” in women’s prisons by other women who take an affront to it. I’m asked not to read “My Angry Vagina.” I remember the first time I read an article in which Eve Ensler was saying she was having trouble with her publicist about using the title *The Vagina Monologues*. She said, “What do we call it? *The Cunt Chronicles*?”

[Laughter]

The Pussy Papers?” All this stuff is a part of how I engage when I think about feminism, feminist theater and feminist approach, and then I’m right in it. I’m in it. I’m one of the gang.

LM: I notice they call our work “political” when we know we’re human beings. I notice that. So yes, my

work is political because I know I'm a human being and I know the people I love and grew up with, and care about and see, are people.

JD: You want to add anything, Holly?

HH: No.

JD: OK. I'm curious if we can think about audiences maybe for a minute. How do you see your audience? Do you imagine people in the audience who are like you or unlike you? Patrick referred to Holly's piece, *Preaching to the Perverted*, which still is such a wonderful title because often artists who do self-conscious, political work are accused of "preaching to the converted." I'm curious, Whom do you think of when you create work? Who is in your audience? Are there other audiences you'd like to reach? How does that affect your choices?

LM: I make for lovers. You know how you want to go out on a date and experience art, and you see something with Tom Cruise and it's totally sexist, but you're having fun because you're out on a date? I want to make the work people out on a date can see, but their politics do not have to be discarded. You can go and have a beautiful experience, and feel a little sexy at the end of the night, but not feel you've corrupted yourself. So yeah, for the lovers.

HH: I want to redo *Mission: Impossible* with you as our action star.

[Laughter]

So good.

LM: Me too.

RJ: I make work that, hopefully, will be universal. Living in San Francisco, I remember I was approached about doing *The Vagina Monologues* and a publicist had said to Ensler, "Rhodessa Jones created the vagina in the Bay Area."

[Laughter]

I was thrilled because my work always has talked about my female reality, and then I'm a black woman who sang, "I got a story to tell." Everybody goes, "You got to hear it. She is really, really far-out." In the early days, I was naked all the time. I always was doing work that was nude theater, but it was my stories. I had been a nude dancer. I was the only black girl in a troupe of six crazy white women that was hanging upside down and bouncing off concrete, so people were wondering, Who the hell are you? I always would be the only one. I started to want to tell my story, and then I realized if you build the work that's rich in texture and tells the story of growing up in this culture -- last night, yours was wonderful, about Haiti -- I wanted to talk about being an African-American woman growing up in the 1950s and the 1960s. When I'm really, really, really smart and the team -- the other people who might help you, the production people, when they're as diverse -- it becomes a story of our history in this country with my history at the center, which sometimes is very bloody and painful and harrowing, but the sides hold us up. I was a hippie. I came of age during the 1960s and that's very much a part of the music, the design, and it always surprises people there were black hippies. Jimi Hendrix was a hippie, goddamnit.

[Laughter]

People go, "Oh, my God, you were a hippie?" "You damn right, I was a hippie."

[Laughter]

I was at Attica when the police bombed Attica. I make work that seduces. I hope it does. It seduces men and women. I've seen women bring their men and it's like, "Oh, a black woman. Oh, Jesus, I really don't

have any reason to be here." I'll say, "You're cute, but you're not that cute." He'll say, "She's talking to me." I always hope I make work that's socially, politically seductive and, hopefully, makes us all engage in a conversation in which everybody's included. That's what I'm always hoping for.

HH: One of the first gigs I had, maybe prophetically, outside of the East Village -- which, if you live in the East Village for a certain amount of time (I guess it happens in any art world), you start to think that that is the world -- was in Michigan. I was surprised to see people still lived in Michigan. I thought, Why?

[Laughter]

Still living there, huh?

[Laughter]

I went to the University of Michigan and with these two women, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, did this piece, *Dress Suits to Hire*. We were building on the shoulders of lots of other people -- at least three other people -- who had been thinking about performing lesbian sexuality and calling it that. But the idea you would do it for whomever? We used to say, "It's a public performance." People who were interested showed up and I remember that evening because it was framed like, "Should they do this?" A certain strand of feminist criticism at the time was the male gaze would overpower any agency we had. I remember people saying, "She's going to write for television. Are you going to write for television? She's going to write for television." Now when I meet young artists, they're all like, "Yeah, I'm doing this, but I can hardly wait till I get my TV show." I want to address the "preaching to the converted" thing because I stole that thing from my friend, David Román, who wrote a great article -- I think it's great because it's about me of course, but also Tim Miller -- about preaching to the converted. He took this idea anybody who's politically engaged has heard ("Oh, you're just preaching to the converted") -- in other words, if you're not talking to the most right-wing person in the room at the time or the most right-wing person in the country at the time, you're not able -- for a while the criticism was, "She's not addressing Senator

Jesse Helms and persuading him through her lesbian solo work.”

[Laughter]

“She hasn’t been able to reach out to Senator Jesse Helms and address him in a respectful way.” “It is failed work.” Any leftist has felt the stakes have been set that way against him or her. In other words, the powerful people who are ignoring you, talking about you and building their careers on you, you haven’t persuaded them, so you’re a failure. David Román took this idea about, actually, church or any kind of religious services. Faith isn’t stable, whether it’s political faith or religious faith, and you go to your church or your temple, whatever your place of workshop, on a regular basis and the clergy engages you in a provocative discussion. Your faith needs to be inspired, interrogated and challenged. You’re always -- I’m using a Christian model here because I did go to Christian leadership camp and it keeps bleeding through --

[Laughter]

backsliding into disbelief. There’s also a powerful experience about being in the same room with other people who, even if you go to the church I went to (United Church of Christ), people were there for different reasons and had different experiences of it. He says we should embrace that model when we talk about the theater. I thought that was an interesting idea, to honor what we’re doing here. Most of the people who come to see my work are left of center, but that’s a big range. It used to be it includes what used to be the right wing.

[Laughter]

Then there’s just the abyss.

[Laughter]

Very big range. There’s an active engagement in that and there’s something powerful about being in a room where becoming the next Tom Cruise is not the cultural ideal at the moment. There’s something very powerful about stepping out of that.

JD: Have any of you ever performed in front of audiences where you didn't feel safe?

LM: Yeah. I just was thinking about this as Holly was speaking. I was once invited to perform in Pittsburgh and it was in a space I had read to be Black Nationalist. This was when I was much younger and I was like, "Oh, God, I'm a lesbian, what's going to happen here?" I went through my set and I was probably 20 minutes in when I ran out of material. I was like, "Oh, God, I have to do the queer stuff now. This is the moment." I announced it. I looked out at this audience with the incense and the padded wraps

[Laughter]

and I said, "Now is the time in my set when I have to do the lesbian work and it might be hard for some of you who are out here." This woman calls out, "Yeah, it'd be even harder if all of us weren't dykes."

[Laughter]

I looked at the audience again and it was like, "Oh."

RJ: They already got the word. They got the memo.

LM: That's why they were there. I was totally deluded looking out into the space. There were black gay men there too who I was reading as militant, so it was my gaze that was all fucked up. They were there to love, be supportive and hear the word, and then, suddenly, the set got good and everybody was laughing. I relaxed, but I was petrified walking into that space. That was a great lesson because it actually taught me how to privilege that I'm taking up space as I am and trust the people who are in the room are the people who are ready to see me as a person. I bring that lesson when I'm in Baton Rouge, LA and it's election time 2008 and it's a red state. I find even though the people in the audience are not

black queer people, if I trust the stories and myself, they'll be there with me. Skill is a part of that. Spectacle and awe. Making people laugh. Beauty is contagious. If you bring craft to the table, it's hard to ignore. It was Mo'Nique, the comedian (now Oscar-winning actor), who said her brother used to do her bookings and one time he booked her in a white supremacist meeting. It was a bad situation. She walks up to the stage and there are all these white supremacists. They're like, "What's going on?" and she's like, "What's going on?" It was a complete mistake, but she got through the first jokes and they started laughing because she needed the gig. She couldn't walk away. She couldn't walk away from the gig because they were going to pay her and it was a contract. There's something to that. This quarter, I'm teaching my students art is about risking something. Getting up there, you should be sweating. It shouldn't be easy to do what you do. Sometimes, those moments, we're meeting each other and we're not sure. People are coming because maybe they're not sure they want to see Holly Hughes or Rhodessa Jones or Lenelle Moïse or Patrick. They're not sure, but they're coming. If we risk something, I believe more often than not magic can happen. Just a temporary space to meet each other and renew our faith in this American project, and whatever else we're after.

RJ: With these American characters. I would say I can't remember feeling endangered, but as you were talking, one of my most acute memories is it has been largely with my own community -- with African-Americans -- that I go into it and I've had my best revelations about it. I've also had people like, "Oh no, she is not going to go there." I remember I sang my vagina song from my show about hot flashes, *Surges and Private Summers*, which is a show about menopause. African-American Women on Tour, they had invited me, and it was dinner and I was like, "OK, everybody, sing along:

[Laughter]

Vagina, vagina, vagina." They all got into it, but the old ladies were like, "I know you ain't come up in here talking about no vaginas."

[Laughter]

Then after the show, this old lady came up to me -- old black lady -- and said, "That kind of singing and dancing should be done after midnight."

[Laughter]

She said, "I loved it, but you should be in jail."

[Laughter]

But she was totally changed. She said to her daughter, "This what you brought me out to see" . . .

[Laughter]

The first time I did *Big Butt Girls* at the National Black Theater Festival, I was on with Djola Branner. I don't know if you know Pomo Afro Homos, but Djola, one of the performers, did a piece called *Sexy Sadie*, which was about his mother and Alzheimer's. I'm sitting in the audience when he comes on and he's in drag, and he's beautiful and these ladies -- these three old colored ladies -- come in and they're late. He's standing there at the top of the stairs and the one lady says, "Uh-uh, let's go, that's a man" and the other two say, "Uh-uh, we staying, that's a man."

[Laughter]

I'm thinking, I got to go on after this? The same ladies, they sat through the whole thing, and I did *Big Butt Girls* and they came up. I said, "Oh no," because it's about jail, so the language, gesture and all this other stuff. The oldest one said to me, "This ain't theater, honey" -- and this changed my life -- "this is ministry." She said, "That's what you doing." Like you just said, bringing the word. That was pretty astounding. Then back to men who've influenced me. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, two or three years ago, he did a piece and there was a "God bless." He was talking to the Christians. He said, "Who doesn't God bless?" He started calling out, "God bless a kike, God bless" and it was very interesting. He brought the house down in San Francisco in a big Masonic hall. That's how he opened the piece. Then my brother, Bill, always says, "Naming things is only the intention to make things" and "If we can't share love, let's

share information.” I approach stuff to diffuse what might feel violent or dangerous.

JD: Holly, you don’t have any experience with danger?

RJ: *Psychology Today*.

[Laughter]

HH: One of the scariest moments I had repeatedly in that Groundhog’s Day life of the solo performance person was in the moments right after the NEA defunding 20-something years ago. Suddenly, I was a part of “Karen Finley and the Three Homosexuals,” as we were often called, or the “NEA Four,” like a bad band that played . . .

[Laughter]

What I had done that was wrong -- the bad thing, whatever it was -- was not named because of course what I had done wrong was simple. People would come to see the freak show, really. You always want a new audience and you want new people, but these people came waiting for me to freak them out. They were unreachable and that really was difficult. That was a difficult moment. I try to do work that in some ways scares me, although I don’t know exactly, and sometimes it’s a big scare and sometimes it’s smaller, more existential, at two o’clock in the morning fear. In the first solo I did, *World without End*, I was inspired by this amazing political rant I had heard in the New York subways by this guy. Usually, when people on public transportation go off, everybody ignores them or moves to another car, but this guy went into a rant that was beautifully crafted about, “They say they don’t hate black people, but.” There was a whole rant I tried to capture, to appropriate. I thought it was a great rhetorical rant and everybody in that space was paying attention to it. “They say they don’t hate black people, but then this

and then that and then this and we don't have that." He also was in command. He just wasn't a crazy person. He really was an unrecognized artist.

RJ: Talent.

HH: Yeah. He was a wordsmith. He was comfortable. Maybe he had been doing this for a long time and this was my first performance of it, but I thought, He's a real master. Everybody really was scared, but his questions were resonant and hovering in the air and we were all listening in that way you listen without looking. Completely silent other than him. I wanted to engage the idea in the late 1980s lesbianism was not about erotic attraction between women, but man hating. What if you were to say the worst thing you can imagine on stage? In this piece, I opened with the idea . . . Do I hate men? Am I man-hater? It was bookended by this guy's speech. It also was bookended by having this odd sexual encounter with a man, while still claiming the title of a lesbian, so it was . . .

[Laughter]

I remember it being very scary at different places. Bill Talen, now Reverend Billy, had to rescue me from an audience in San Francisco. There were some men who were coming up on stage. He was like, "You have to get out of here and we're taking you through the back exit of Life on the Water Theater," and a few other times. That was interesting. You don't know exactly when you decide to go on thin ice. What's going to be there on the shoreline? It's easy to scare audiences. It's actually really easy to disturb the social contract. But for why -- for what reason -- for why. Maybe for grammatical reasons.

[Laughter]

But for what reasons can you do that? Can you handle that? How are you going to shape their emotional response? In this piece, *The Dog and Pony Show*, which is in part about becoming a crazy dog lady who goes to dog shows, I'd been thinking, What if I got people -- these other dog lady people -- to come to

the show? It's late -- it's eight o'clock -- and the dog show is early in the morning. It would be better if the show were performed at five and I were serving pizza or it'd be better if it were at seven a.m. They could make a seven a.m. curtain because they do that all the time. That's when dog shows happen. A lot of these people are Republican and come into the room. It's been an interesting experience. Could we have the room hold different sets of people and what's the story? What's the experience?

RJ: One thing you're saying . . . I did a show called *The Legend of Billy Overstreet*, which is about me dancing in America. There's a section in the show that was based on *Let's Make a Deal*. I would invite people from the audience to come down and make erotic fantasy. I remember being in Austria -- talk about danger -- and these clowns (they were professional clowns from another show, three men) come up on stage and have to put their hands in this plastic can I had, pull out a prop and make an erotic fantasy with it. What happened was they got into a three-ring thing and they were balancing a sausage on their noses, and one guy had on a robe and nothing else because they had heard about this erotic show, and then, race, race and sex. I'm winding it down and Idris Ackamoor, who works with me as my musician, is checking this out. It's getting rowdy and they keep trying to grab me. It's like, "How do you hold control of it?" Karen Finley said it's very trippy when you bring people into the space and you're naked and you're talking about eroticism. I remember the one guy with a robe on got a hard-on and won -- it was audience applause that decided who won -- and they're like, "Yea," and I'm like, "Yeah," and I give him his black bottom cupcakes because they were the prize, two black bottom cupcakes. He's like, "Black bottom cupcakes?" and tries to grab me. He says, "I don't get to fuck you?" All of a sudden, it was very violent. It was very, very violent. Then there were cupcakes here. I picked one up, pushed it in his face and said, "No, no, no, baby, you've been fucked."

[Laughter]

The women in the audience were like, "All right," but it was scary. That was scary, but that was in the

early days of, like, I'm going to be outrageous. Yeah, that was one of these nights. I had a woman once who threw the cupcake away, threw me back, stuck her tongue down my throat and sucked my tongue for a minute. She said, "I want to kiss you." That was pretty wild too. It's the early days for me. That's when it really was dangerous. Or the Medea Project. We would go into a public space and do a show. The very first one, I had a lot of young women who were coming out in jail. Queer Nation was happening. We created installations in the lobby of Theater Artaud and one of them was this votive with all these flowers. It had a bike -- a big Harley -- with two young blond women dressed in leather. I said to them, "No matter what happens, do not let your lips unlock." They were in this sexy kiss for the whole time the audience was filing in, these two girls. I said, "Just don't penetrate each other, but go for it."

[Laughter]

There were men who got very upset, but there were too many women who were titillated. One black woman said, "Oh, man, they in jail. That happens in jail all the time." Which was a wonderful discourse to have in the lobby when we were doing this show. It sort of diffused it, but there were men who really were quite angry. "These two women, how dare they?" They were on a motorcycle, man, and I said, "Just hang in there." One lady got mad because, she said, "The kids." She said, "Children are seeing this."

HH: Oh.

RJ: Yeah, exactly. That was in the early years. When you started talking, I kept thinking, The early years when we just were trying to push the envelope to see what we could do.

HH: You were a pioneer of being a feminist, womanist performer, being naked. Now burlesque almost is a cliché, but 30 years ago it was a different thing to

RJ: Be naked.

HH: Bring that world into . . .

RJ: Black women got very upset with me.

HH: Yes, I'm sure.

RJ: Black women were like, "Sister, why you put yourself out there on the line?" but it was for all those reasons. It was empowering for me because I paid for my daughter's special education. I did all this stuff through dancing naked . . . African-American sisters were saying, "That always follow us." I said, "Really? That we're highly sexual entities, but we're sexual creatures or sexual slaves, but never claiming our own or being empowered by sex?" I was strutting around in five-inch heels and little aprons and the sisters would talk to me. I had a lot of conversations with black women. They would hold me up backstage. "All right, girl, you got to explain yourself." But then the lesbians would be coming and going, "Hey, it's all right, I'm checking it out."

[Laughter]

"She's beautiful."

[Laughter]

JD: It seems part of the challenge is to figure how to create boundaries for audiences, so that you can push your own artistically, while somehow staying safe, while perhaps what you don't want is the audience to stay safe, so that they'll somehow transform themselves, politically or intellectually. I

wonder how that works with your notion, Lenelle, of making lovers, of having the audience love you as well. Which leads me to a question about what stories you all tell and how the content of what you're talking about has to do with any of this . . . Do you feel you can talk about anything you want as performers? Do you feel censored by yourselves, by culture, by history? How do you decide what it is you address? Are there things you'd like to address you feel you can't address? Are there any stories you'd like to hear from other people you haven't heard?

RJ: I am constantly examining my own reality on stage . . . Real interesting thing to me. In *Big Butt Girls*, as well as *The Legend of Billy Overstreet*, I was talking about being a black woman in the commercial field, commercial theater, commercial film, and how I ended up making a lot of work because I couldn't get work. There was no work for me in LA. All my beautiful white actress friends were stomping each other to get to a cold read, so that was one of the reasons I started to, like, "What can I write about that I know about that I think we all should know about?" Another thing, I always was interested in inclusion. How do we all find a place at the table? How do we have that conversation? How do we really expand the American character? It's not just black and white -- it's all these other levels -- that always was what drove me, telling a story from my point of view. God bless audiences. People appreciated that. Sometimes, it caught them by surprise, being interested in knowing what my story was, so, in answer to your question, a lot of times it was the same story, but it was my story about, like, menopause. What was it like to be a woman facing 50 and insomnia? Many women in the audience were like, "Amen." It just wasn't my story. That's why it was a homerun.

LM: I wrote my play, *Expatriate*, because I had an actress friend, an African-American woman, who really was brilliant. I would go to see her in off-off-off-off-off Broadway shows in New York, all these ensemble productions, and she always would be the only woman of color on stage and a very masterful

actor compared to her ensemble members and always the fewest lines. She spun gold out of lines, so I said to her, "I'm a writer. What can I write for you? Who do you want to be up there because you're barely there and I only came to see you?"

[Laughter]

She was interested in the expatriate story. Who are the Josephine Bakers of the world? Why do they . . . So I said, "I can write that for you." So I started to write it, and then she quit the project because she got cast in an all-white ensemble, where she was playing the black best friend to the white ingénue who's going to get the guy in the end. The show was called *Underwear: A Space Musical*.

[Laughter]

HH: We all knew it.

LM: She called me up and was weeping about it . . . "I just got these agents and I always have wanted agents, and I got these agents and I told them I was interested in doing this show, and they said I cannot do work that is under the radar." I said, "This is very interesting. What does that mean?" Here's this moment where I have this desire to write this story for somebody who sees my work as "under the radar." Of course *Expatriate* went on to get acclaim by *The New York Times* and I was like, "Oops," and it was fine because the actress who ended up taking the role really was meant to play the role, so it was a gift in a way that she sort of catalyzed this. I write for actors. I write plays I know will be challenging to people who really are skilled at what they do, but don't get enough opportunities to play complex characters, to really track a journey. I believe in that. I believe audiences -- no matter what they look like or whom they make love to -- I believe a good story is contagious. I do . . . I knew all along the journey I was writing a story -- it's a two-woman show, the actors have to play multiple characters -- . . . Are ready for that. Not everybody else did. It's interesting when you're imagining a world or a possibility or an art

project you're not sure anybody is going to fund or the people you want to be a part of it will be a part of it, but you have to stick to it and the audience is there.

HH: It seems there's no shortage of stories to tell. It seems because the ways stories -- even though we have a proliferation of storytelling mediums, there's social networking, millions of TV channels, blah, blah, YouTube, all these different ways to tell stories -- a lot of times the same couple of stories get told. In fact, the way the art of storytelling gets taught, it's like, "There's a couple of stories and there's a couple of plot narratives," so young imaginations already are getting shaped. People tell surprising stories. Who would've known that Jodie Foster, of all the things she could do, would decide she must rescue her good friend, Mel Gibson? There's many train wrecks in Hollywood. Why not just let him lie in his own anti-Semitic, racist vomit?

[Laughter]

But no, she rescues him by having a movie about a man -- Mel Gibson playing Mel Gibson -- who is redeemed by using a hand puppet called "the beaver," and then she calls the movie *The Beaver*?!

[Laughter]

You couldn't make that shit up.

[Laughter]

It's called *The Beaver* and it's not a funny movie. Something happens to you when you become Jodie Foster and Mel Gibson, where you take yourself very seriously or something like that. But were not the camera people, the makeup people, like, "I'm working on *The Beaver* with a beaver hand puppet?!"

[Laughter]

What's the follow-up, *The Pussy*?!

[Laughter]

I'm not as imaginative and I'm not as interested, despite my Christian background, in stories of

redemption through a beaver hand puppet and Jodie Foster.

JD: Have you seen it?

RJ: No, I'm afraid.

LM: I'm afraid too.

HH: I posted that on Facebook.

LM: The only time I can see a brown person on the big screen is if it's a beaver.

RJ: If it's a hand puppet.

[Laughter]

HH: I posted something about that on Facebook. I only live on Facebook. It's a rare, in-flesh appearance here. It's amazing how many people, who are friends of mine and really smart, said, "You haven't seen this movie and it's actually much more complicated." I'm like, "It can't be." I would pay ten dollars just for the joy they brought into the world by cracking me up.

[Laughter]

I don't want it to be good. I'm fully satisfied.

[Laughter]

How can it be good? In what way can it good? Unless they all said, "We're just kidding. He's going to

jail.”

[Laughter]

JD: Speaking of what you spend ten dollars on, let’s talk a little bit about funding, given the economy, given what’s happening in the funding scene right now, the -- quote, unquote -- “funding scene.” Are there particular organizations that make your work possible? Are there particular theaters you can count on? Do you feel it’s really a difficult time to fund the work you want to do? I’m curious.

LM: Academe is very nice to me. Thank you, academe.

[Laughter]

That’s it. That’s all I have to say.

HH: Yeah, thank God for some academic funding. I’ve been touring this show a little bit and that’s been great, but almost every time, except if it’s in academe, you lose money and that’s made possible by the fact that I have a day job. I look at the -- and this isn’t to slam the cultural organizations that present me because times really are hard -- but even if you were to sell out every seat, every night, you wouldn’t possibly be able (and I’m only one person) to recoup what you’ve put into a very modest show. It’s not possible. It’s true. It’s incredibly difficult. I was having coffee with this former student of mine, who’s doing very well in New York. This young queer woman, this young queer feminist. She started . . . Some class and talking about what she wants to do, and she’s like, “Yada, yada, yada, I want to make a lot of money.” I hear that a lot from younger generations. That’s not wrong. What’s different from a generation we might’ve been a part of is we would bleed with that, but also maybe the economic conditions are such that, but essentially she sees any alternative cultural scene I thought of as my world as a stepping stone until she get the television show.

JD: Who are her role models? Whom does she see making that kind of money doing what she's doing?

HH: We were talking about another artist whose show we had seen and we were parsing what we thought about the show. She was like, "I don't know what I think about the work, but I admire her career." I thought, I might've felt envious of someone's career, but the first thing that struck me was, Would I admire someone's career whose work I really didn't like? It just felt like a certain generational shift.

JD: It's entrepreneurial in a whole different way.

HH: She wants to be Tina Fey, although if you read *Bossy-Pants*, it's not exactly a bed of roses to be bossy-pants.

SJ: To piggyback on what you're saying, it's all the new models they see. Don't forget -- what is the title of 50 Cent's? -- *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. That is a mantra. My granddaughter constantly talks about herself and her friends and what they're going to school for and it's about getting paid. "This is going to make a lot of money." My daughter told me, "Mom, I love what you do, but mom, when I'm your age, I'm going to have my own house and I'm going to have a couple of cars." As an artist myself, I'm all of the above, academe, and Cultural Odyssey, my company, we are funded. We are one of those groups -- it's been 30 years now -- so we get into these three-year cycles and that helps a lot, so by the time a grant is running down, we're able to pursue other ones. My Medea Project is getting a lot of medical support because they're interviewing the women about the theater as a healing tool in helping people who live with HIV/AIDS. We've been venturing out into new territory, but right now the scene is very dire. They're

telling younger, smaller theater companies, “Don’t bother, don’t bother joining and don’t bother creating a 501(c)(3).” That’s all going on. Cultural Odyssey is 30-years-old, so we’re ensconced. We got rid of a large overhead. We don’t have a lot of people working for us like we have in the past.

JD: What are your questions? Patrick came up to remind me I should ask. Please. Who would like to ask a question of our guests? Yes, please.

Not Named: Rhodessa, you said something I’ve been lingering on for a long time. You said you want to create work that seduces. Just this notion of creating work that seduces really is quite stunning and powerful. I’m wondering if -- and this is a question for all of you -- if you can think of moments or stories or an experience, where you were seduced . . . Are there your own moments of seduction you did not necessarily create, but where you were pulled in and seduced and your own moment made its way into your art?

RJ: Last night, I was incredibly seduced. There were several moments in Lenelle’s work that were off the chain. There’s a subway story. There’s a story of Michael Jackson. Jean-Michel Basquiat. Her language, words just would knock me back into the seat. I’d have to stop trying to think about it all and just go with her. It was so sweet sometimes, it was edges on my teeth at the same time. It was ferocious and sweet at the same time, which I like.

[Laughter]

Bring on that hot sauce that’s kind of sweet. You’re wonderful. She’s outrageous.

LM: Thank you.

RJ: I remember in my own life when it hit me that I was a theater goddess. When I'm on stage -- a solo performer -- and people are all with me. I've been in situations where I know people have never looked at a black woman before in an experimental theater and I'm the one they're looking at. I had a Polish boyfriend-director who used to say, "You're an amazing looking creature. Be 20-feet tall." That's my secret. I am being 20-feet tall and this story? You might not like it, but you have to hear it. In the age of President Barack Obama, when so many people are scared and they're not sure, he's the black guy, so of course he's failing. At the same time, I love him and every chance I get, I tell the story of him and Michelle in their bedroom having sex on the night he wins and the audience is like, "Oh no, she is not going there." Can you imagine how powerful? "Who's the man, baby? Who's the man?" She says, "Oh, baby, call me the First Lady, baby!"

[Laughter]

The audience is like, "Yeah, yeah." That's the other side of it. Stop being so stupid, prejudiced and close-minded. There's sex in the White House, OK, and that's a good thing.

[Laughter]

LM: Speaking of politically seductive, President Obama was a moment for all of us as a nation that was very, very seductive. Change was suddenly sexy, tall and black.

RJ: Smartest guy in the room.

LM: Yeah, intelligent. There was that moment when we all felt that very strongly. For me, it's Basquiat and Michael who are seductive moments in my art. I soak them up. I went to see the Basquiat retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and being on multiple floors with his work -- and seeing hip-hop, jazz and boxing, all this stuff that . . . Work in so short a time -- really was magical for me. I still

weep watching Michael, “Earth Song” video, “Man in the Mirror,” I’m destroyed. There was nobody like Michael. He was so problematic and holding space for us in our dysfunction as a society in his body, so watching Michael, oh, Michael.

HH: I remember, at the height of queer nationalism and ACT-UP in 1991 or something like that, meeting in some friend’s apartment that had cable -- it was one friend who had cable and a real job -- to watch (I can’t remember if it was, I don’t think it could’ve been, “Thriller”) some music video. It wasn’t as big a moment culturally as election night 2008, but we were all sitting there watching, and then afterwards we had hours of discussion of every move, very seriously discussing Michael’s music video.

LM: They were international careers. Everybody in the world would watch a Michael video at the exact same time. You did. You felt you were part of something greater than you. Remember the “Black or White” video and the end, where he’s smashing car windows that say “KKK” on them? It was deep, man, it really was deep and the transforming faces, technology we have never seen before. He was the stuff.

JD: We have a few more minutes. Probably time for another couple of questions. Anyone else? Yes, please.

Not Named: This conversation started with the question about . . . “Feminist,” but I’m also interested in your thoughts about identifying as theater artists, performance artists and spoken word artists. Those categories and the way you employ those categories and the way they’re employed around your work in conversation that either puts you into or keeps you out of, what audiences it either puts you in front or keeps you away from, what funding, just thoughts about those sorts of questions.

RJ: I have all those people in my audiences. Hip-hop artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Who's the other one in New York? There are a couple of these guys who I've known since they were little and they bring other people. Sarah Jones, who's somebody that used to come and take workshops with me. Danny Hoch. They would come and see *Big Butt Girls* at La MaMa 20-25 years ago. They'd be sitting in the audience going, "Oh, my God," and they would tell me what I was doing. I started to understand I was creating this bridge. It was theater work, it was spoken word and it was hip-hop. Cecil Taylor, the pianist, says multiculturalism always is the next breath, so all of a sudden, you're honored anyway as an artist, just like you'd be if you were a painter or a writer. As you said last night, with writing, it's about observing and remembering. When we make work right now in the world, all that is there for us. Listening to Jay-Z talk about *Decoded*, his book, and how he started selling drugs for the gear, and all of a sudden, he's talking to Oprah Winfrey and my granddaughter turned me onto Jay-Z. Jay-Z is very much a part of the syntax, as well as the . . . Always has been there, all of it. Spoken word, theater arts and hip-hop. I came along just as young people were beginning to understand my doing prison art, even, and putting *Terminator* in *Big Butt Girls*. They understood. It was like, "Yeah." They knew, came and told me I was on the right track. "Ms. Jones, you're the bomb," they'd say.

[Laughter]

"That's Professor Jones, she's the bomb." I'm like, "Gee, thanks." If you do your work seriously, to answer your question, and you're interested in how you can make inroads, they will come. They come, the children come and the old people come because everybody's talking about what you're doing. Again, it's being seductive.

JD: Lenelle or Holly?

HH: I'm comfortable with all those terms and they've all been used. I've used them, they've been used

about me. In some ways, “performance” exists as a term in this culture because the way the theater is made seems so codified and to make it in a different way -- to be the writer, the performer, et cetera, to wear different hats -- already makes you invisible to that frame of the theater sometimes. Maybe it was thinking about David Lindsay-Abaire, someone I knew from the downtown, whatever it was, performance, the theater, whatever you called it, scene a long time ago. I was hearing him interviewed about shifting to making realist plays after he’d made *Fuddy Meers*, work I actually liked better. I like experimental forms -- I can think of a number of other artists who came out of that -- and the narrative was like, “I challenged myself to make . . .” I don’t find myself as engaged by that narrative form. Here’s what I think. In this time, when there’s an explosion of forms through new media and blogs and all these other kinds of stuff, I go to the theater -- I got to the theater as often as I can -- to see things that can only happen in the theater with live bodies, which could involve technology too, but that sort of realist storytelling happens very well on television and I don’t have to get dressed up to go see it.

[Laughter]

I’m not as interested when I feel it’s a, but it seems a way Americans are primed to take a story seriously, if it happens in a certain kind of narrative form.

JD: Lenelle, you want the last word on this?

LM: I’m just thinking about all my friends who were part of the spoken word movement who really detest the term “spoken word.” For some people, it’s not legitimate, you’re not crafting, you’re not writing. Some people even equate spoken word with “freestyle,” which is a completely different form, but this idea your work is of you, naturally, spontaneously, it’s not something you sit down and work at, and you’re doing something new and post-hip-hop and not something that’s part of an ancient tradition of recitation. I hear that, but I also know being called a spoken word artist has opened many doors for

me because people want to see the cool new thing. I acknowledge sometimes these terms are about capitalism -- they're about classifying for consumption -- so you take what you can from it. For me, that movement almost was a specific moment in the 1990s, so now when I still hear people say, "Spoken word," I'm thinking, Oh, my goodness, but the people I think of as the pioneers of this have moved onto other things. They're making theater, they're performance artists, they're writing music and they're doing other things they're less known for, so it's interesting. I'm OK with being called a spoken word artist, but I call myself a poet. I recognize my work and the work of other people who call themselves poets and people who call themselves spoken word artists.

JD: Thank you. Let me invite you all to come tonight to see Holly's *The Dog and Pony Show*, to come tomorrow night to see Rhodessa's *Big Butt Girls*. Let me thank again Patrick, Ann and Ramón for giving us this opportunity to talk. Thank you all for being here and listening to these wonderful artists talk so wonderfully about their work. Thanks a lot for coming.