

Fearless Discovery

Ishmael Houston-Jones returns to Philadelphia for intense collaboration in "Specimens."

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"I try to get them to create things that they would not do if they were working alone. I try to get them to surprise themselves."

Andrew Simonet is on the spot.

"Have you ever been penetrated?" a voice demands.

"Are you telling the truth now?" asks another.

Simonet only has time to reply, "I can imagine that!" He knows that he must keep his eyes closed and keep moving, and the questions are being fired at him so fast, he can barely get even those few words out.

No, it's not a scene from a WWII prisoner-of-war drama—it's a rehearsal exercise. Simonet, a member of Headlong Dance Theater, is being interrogated by performance artist Stanya Kahn and choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones, and this inquisition is just one of the intense improv techniques being employed by Houston-Jones in the development of *Specimens*, a collaborative movement-based theater work premiering this weekend at the Christ Church Neighborhood House in Old City.

Houston-Jones, a nationally known dancer, choreographer, writer and actor, is here under the auspices of Arranged Introductions, the Tyler School of Art program that coordinates a wide variety of projects by local and national avant-garde artists, often in unlikely Philadelphia locales. Co-producers Carlota Schoolman and Mary Griffin felt from the start that Houston-Jones would be an ideal choice. Says Schoolman, "I knew right away how carefully Ishmael works, that all of the people involved would bond from the project."

Judging from rehearsals like the one described above, there's been a whole lot of bonding going on in the creation of *Specimens*. Developed from May to June, the piece has allowed Houston-Jones and his collaborators—New York-based Kahn, Philadelphians Simonet, David Brick and Amy Smith (all from Headlong), and Paule Turner—to explore the limits of intimacy, trust and personal revelation.

"What my work seeks to do is often to have people find new things in themselves, about their identity as people, as artists, as creators," notes Houston-Jones. "I try to get them to create things that they would not do if they were working alone. I try to get them to surprise themselves." With Arranged Introductions' help, he carefully selected the collaborators in *Specimens* knowing that, like him, they would value a complex improvisational working method that merged autobiographical text and movement. Even the title of the work (inspired by a tour to Philadelphia's Mütter Museum of medical curiosities) conveys a sense of seemingly divergent elements ("specimens") coming together for a critical experiment.

Specimens marks a kind of homecoming for Houston-Jones. Born and raised in Harrisburg, PA, he has used movement and text to explore issues of personal identity for the last

25 years. In 1972, he came to Philadelphia on his way to New York City. He ended up staying here for nearly seven years, studying and performing with many key artists in the developing Philadelphia performing arts scene. "I was in Group Motion for two years... and I formed a sort of loose confederation with Terry Fox [now performance curator at the Painted Bride]... [I] taught at Terry's studio on Church Street in Old City (before anybody lived in the area)... I joined a hidden artists' community here."

Houston-Jones' stay in Philadelphia allowed him to expand his creativity beyond traditional theater. "In college I had been doing theater, but I was always drawn to the physicality of movement more than acting. So when I came here I took classes at Temple with Eva Gholson and Hellmut Gottschild."

From these seminal experiences in Philadelphia, Houston-Jones discovered many of his values as a performing artist. He notes that even in the 1970s he was committed to visceral, emotionally charged live performance that probed the vagaries of improvisation and collaboration.

Houston-Jones continues to refine his creativity as a choreographer, performer, writer and director. His last project, *Unsafe, Unsited*, was a collaboration with two openly gay performers, Patrick Sckulley and Keith Hennessy, which Houston-Jones described as "three queer men who [had] a basis in improvisation making something together."

As for *Specimens*, Houston-Jones will most likely be the only collaborator who does not appear in the work. "I like working with people in equal roles. I am interested in projects where I am directing from the outside and not just performing. And I've never been one to try to put my choreographic stamp on people."

At a rehearsal on May 30 at the Headlong Dance Studios, it became clear that—more than anything else—the work was about the special capabilities and vulnerabilities of the collaborators. By distinguishing truth from fact in the creative process, Houston-Jones pushed the five performers to unearth the emotional essence of their individual experiences: "I call the work 'autobiographical fiction.' I want the kernel of what people reveal to be true, but I am not really interested in facts. I get really bored when people start telling me details of their lives; when they think that's profound because they're telling a factual truth—when actually an emotional truth which may not be based in fact at all can have a much more profound effect."

During *Specimen's* creative process, the collaborators used various improvisational techniques: structuring movement phrases, establishing interactions, generating autobiographical text. The most radical technique—the non-stop interrogation (which was actually more hilarious than disturbing)—involved creating space for personal revelations. For Houston-Jones, this kind of performance preparation not only forces the collaborators to think fast on their feet; it also tests the boundaries of trust. After many interrogations—some while dancing, some while seated in chairs—it was clear that the collaborators had established a strong rapport.

And when the group ran a section of the work, the depth of physical intimacy between the performers was electric. One sequence of movement—full of head rolls, frantic falls and slides on the ground—served as an organizing landmark for the spontaneous duets, trios and solos.

The solos were like danced testimonies. At one point, while the robust, daring Stanya Kahn paraded around with masking tape strapped around her bare breasts and Andrew Simonet methodically changed his clothes in full view, David Brick (a big, terrific dancer) told a strange story of traveling down a lost road to find someone very dear to him. While he sighed and heaved, he inched closer in his chair to Paule Turner and Amy Smith while the couple shared a moment of quiet connection. They rocked against each other, sharing weight. As Kahn's pacing reached a

fever pitch and Simonet finally stood dressed, Brick's story came to an end and he entered the couples' personal space just as Turner pulled up Smith's arms high above her head and let her body fall in a heap to the ground. All the traces of tenderness, secret longing and fearless discovery converged.