

Neal Medley
in conversation with Adrienne Truscott

Adrienne Truscott: We don't have to start officially. I thought I'd turn it on in case you say something smart.

Neal Medlyn: Okay.

Adrienne: Just on accident.

Neal: It's the only way I will say anything smart.

Adrienne: Wait, what were you just saying?

Neal: Oh shit.

Adrienne: Oh, about ballet...

Neal: Oh, yeah, it hurts.

Adrienne: I only ever took two ballet classes because it is too hard. I have questions, just so you know. In case you thought I would just show up and fuck off.

Neal: I'm ready.

Adrienne: Please state your name and identify what kind of artist you are. That is what I had to do the other night.

Neal: Okay. My name is Neal Medlyn and I am a performance artist.

Adrienne: That is what I said exactly. Other people had other terms like live artist.

Neal: That is very popular now.

Adrienne: It's a very 2000 term. I hadn't heard of it before. I was thinking about the different places you perform and the different ways you perform. So my first question was do you care at all what kind of artist you are called?

Neal: No, not really because I always think it's fun. Sometimes in the back of my head, I will pretend as if I was called a choreographer, and I get very excited about that. I don't think I am, but I don't really know if I am a performance artist. I used the word comedy, and that went in a whole wrong direction.

Adrienne: It did?

Neal: That is how I ended up with that messed up gig in Florida where I performed at my job's Christmas party 'cause I had just decided to tell people that I am a comedian. My boss was like, 'oh yeah, why don't you perform at the Christmas party?' and I was like 'okay'. Then later that afternoon, I was like, wait a minute, you know that I really don't tell jokes? I like funny things. He said, 'nah, it's going to be good, don't worry about it'. Then I ended up doing this dance with this Outkast song, and everyone thought I was drunk, because they didn't announce me or anything. To the extent that nobody from the whole rest of the party even mentioned that it happened. I stayed really late because I thought eventually, around three in the morning somebody's going to be like "what the fuck happened, what were you doing?" but no, not at all, never.

Adrienne: Never mentioned again in the history of the office. You have a show at DTW, which clearly means you are a performer or at least conduct workshops in the realm of dance and theater. It makes me

think that since your Beyoncé show and your Prince show, the dance world in particular has really embraced you. Almost a little like uncomfortably tight.

Neal: I can't really breathe.

Adrienne: Its too much, people. Leave me alone. No, but that's true, don't you think?

Neal: Yeah, I think so, which is very exciting. It is exciting to me 'cause a lot of stuff that I have liked in the last couple years I have seen in "dance-based" places like The Kitchen or DTW and PS122 to an extent. I feel there is a whole lot of exciting art being made by those people. I guess it's dance in a lot of ways, but it does seem like performance in a whole lot of other ways. They are dance pieces, but the vocabulary is pulled from other places in this way that is not part of some particular dance lineage or whatever. I don't necessarily feel like it is any more or less dance than some other dances that I have seen, except there is a lot more talking. But I don't really think I make plays either. Anytime I try to think of shows as plays, that just sounds crazy. They are definitely not plays.

Adrienne: Maybe you should think of them as office party events.

Neal: Yeah, purveyor of office party events.

Adrienne: So, because we are conducting an interview, you must tell me some things about it. What are the basics?

Neal: The most basic thing is that it is built around Britney Spears. All the songs are Britney Spears songs, save one. When I started making it, I was interested in some old punk rock performers like GG Allen and particularly Darby Crash—the idea of people who are professional maniacs. That's their job, to fall apart.

Adrienne: Now all I can think about is new terms for what you call yourself: professional maniac that conducts office party events.

Neal: I was also interested in teenage stuff. Originally, I was mixing up Britney Spears and Hannah Montana. And now, I've split them into two parts. So this is part one of what will be a two-part show. The structure of the show is that I start out completely destroyed, and I get more and more pulled together as the show goes on. So that at the end of the show, I'm as pulled together as I can possibly be, as Britney Spears. Also, as I was getting into her, I was realizing the whole thing now with her fans—they have gotten into her since she's been crazy. They don't remember young teenage Britney. They really only know crazy Britney and that's what they identify with.

I was thinking about teenage stuff in general and how you have these very block ideas about how the world should be. You don't really know why you really think that because you are 16 and maybe just making it up. Or you just heard it and thought it sounded right. But then, you really fully commit to it. I was interested in these "purity rings"—all this moral certainty and really strong emotions. And it ended up going off in this slightly fairy tale-ish way, where I was also interested in Dostoevsky's book *The Idiot*. I was interested in the structure of those books and how there are people who just stop the action constantly to tell a long story. I wanted to see what that would be like to try to make a show where there are these various overlapping stories that add up to this thing.

As I was working on all this other stuff which sounds totally non-Britney related, the more I started listening to her most recent albums and watched all these documentaries about her, it all fits back together. She has these things in her documentaries about 'you want life to be a certain way, but then it can't be that way, so you would rather just have nothing at all and have hope that it would be the other way'. I was like, 'woah, that is the whole direction of the show.' The reason I get more and more pulled together is that I decide I want to be purer and purer. By doing that, I keep forgetting more and more. I want to keep forgetting everything so that there is nothing left so I can be really pure. It is interesting to

me to follow the idea of purity to its logical conclusion, which is there is no one around, there is nothing going on, which is obviously not what you really want.

Adrienne: Unless you are a Zen monk, which is pretty far from Britney.

Neal: I was interested in people being on really ridiculous missions, which is in those Dostoevsky books too. Everyone wants something they can't have and they are constantly pulling their hair out because they can't get to it. Anyway, somehow that all became a show.

Adrienne: So, the source material, besides Britney's songs, is blog stuff?

Neal: I wrote most of the text but some of it does come from the documentaries, a little bit comes from a Darby Crash thing that I have on a '45, where the b-side is just one of the ladies in the band tuning her guitar and this lady yashimmy reading some stuff that Darby Crash said in concert – "look at my nose! look at my nose! someone from Huntington Beach crashed my nose. Somebody get me a beer!" And a lot of stuff that Britney has been saying on tour on accident: "peace motherfuckers" and "what's up Sacramento," when she is not in Sacramento. And the whole "my pussy's hanging out."

Adrienne: I didn't know she said that.

Neal: Her microphone was on and she went off into the wings to change clothes. Then she's yelling at her dresser: "my pussy is hanging out, my pussy is hanging out!" and it comes out of all the speakers.

Adrienne: Will your pussy be hanging out in the show?

Neal: Maybe. All I can say is that there was a blogger in Portland that said that she was still having nightmares about Neal's junk: "I did not need to see that."

Adrienne: You deploy your physicality in a really exciting way. Carmine, a young man who we both work with, was telling me this morning that there have been some crazy reviews in Portland describing your physicality on stage.

Neal: When I did the Beyoncé show, someone last year got into describing me as physically bizarre and upsetting. This seems to have stuck so that this year, when I came back out there, there was more of it. They typically say I have greasy hair, that I am prematurely bald, that I am pasty. I start imagining what this person looks like and it sounds awful. There is some strange thing out there of describing me as physically hideous and upsetting. Then she said that my junk was disgusting and gave her nightmares.

Adrienne: In my work, we joke in rehearsal that you and Carmine were described as untrained, which is legitimate in dance speak and fine and part of what I find so fantastic about the way you guys move, that it is outside of the vocabulary of dance. But now you have been dancing a lot. You dance with me, and we try to think that our dances are hard. But we know that they are not dance-dances. And David Neumann's work is not dance-dance, but way more than mine, right? You keep getting asked by dance people to do more work. So are you finding your body freaking out or becoming more adept to doing all this physical stuff?

Neal: It definitely feels easier than before. There are a lot of things that I can think of to do now than I couldn't before. That time in rehearsal when we were saying that I am not sure what my body can do, can I actually flip my foot over? And then you try and fall down and get hurt. Now I know I can't do that move, but I can do these other moves.

Adrienne: It's a journey of self-discovery. Is there dancing in your Britney show?

Neal: Yeah. There is not a lot, but there is a good amount. There is more than there was in the Prince show.

Adrienne: Is it just you or have you made dances for Carmine?

Neal: Carmine and I have a few dances that we do together. I have a dance that I do at the very beginning that is taken from Britney's lazy VMA dance, the comeback dance. We took bits and pieces of that song and it is in the whole show. That song plays underneath the whole show, edited and chopped up. Farah sometimes has it on a tape player and sometimes it is with a song, and sometimes we make a drum beat out of a bit of the song that corresponds to that part of the show.

Adrienne: I know when I started making dances, or thinking about it in college, referring to pop culture was considered a no-no, some easy, lazy, unsophisticated thing. Then I felt there was license to do it and people starting to dance in clubs because theater space was so rare. Then that door was opened up as another possibility to work with and deconstruct, but still not very many people do it. And it can still be easily frowned upon. You seem to do it in a way that excites people. At the risk of asking an annoying question, do you have any thoughts about why?

Neal: I think it is a couple of things. One, I stated early on that it was what I wanted to do so I have been committed to that material. I did this one performance in Austin on the street where I had a jam box that played a Madonna song. I had sex with the tape deck of the thing and that was the beginning. I really liked it and got into it not being off limits because it is so present in everyone's life. Pretty much, it's American culture. Since I was interested in America and being an American artist, I felt that is the material that there is. Also, I feel audiences are much more prepared for that artistic dialogue that involves pop stuff than maybe the arts community. I've noticed the younger people that come to shows don't have any predisposition against pop culture. They can read Heidegger while listening to Beyoncé and it doesn't fuck them up at all. They weren't alive for a conversation that involved real music and the advent of fake music, like disco, the new wave, then electronic pop and then hip-hop. They were born after that debate wasn't happening as much. The last time I read an article that stated 'fake music sucks' was in 1991 in Details. Hip-hop is dead. It has to be. People are much more comfortable with pop music and pop stuff because they get what it is to be into it and at the same time be freaked out by it, which has always been my relationship to it. I like it a lot, but it freaks me out. I find those things the most exciting: 'What? That's horrible! But I can't help it, I love it!'

Adrienne: If you use pop culture, one has to be careful. But that is bullshit. Everything is so postmodern now. There is no way to just hear a song and not hear it without all the information that comes with it, autobiographical information about the artist, the other artist that is mad at them or all this stuff. There is a way in which there is a catholic guilt—if you are a real artist, there can't be that level of pleasure. A super hooky song is like cheap sex, and it is too anti-intellectual.

Neal: Which is still a problem. I feel it is a very American thing to even be okay with it at this point. I don't put a strong emphasis on what my relationship is with the material. A lot of people will come and think it is straight up satire. And I feel 'no, not really.' but on the other hand, I will get people that are legitimate fans of a certain thing, like Beyoncé or Britney Spears or Prince. And then I get people who think 'I liked how you tore that apart.' So I feel like there is a range of reactions to it that I don't feel in control of, but I feel is exciting because I am not trying to be in control of it. A lot of American art that has to do with pop stuff has been coming from this other place that is not necessarily critique, with a big C—Warhol and that kind of stuff—it is not really about attacking consumerism, more reveling in those things. They are just around in so ubiquitous a way in being American that it is impossible to not have a complicated relationship with this thing. I assume if you lived somewhere in Europe, you would have a complicated relationship with your own history. We don't have much of a long history here as far as the idea of America on this continent. So we just have this weird, ongoing, very immediate, really overheated, teenager-y kind of culture where you get really obsessed and angry about something. In Europe, they think 'it will be fine'. They have been around for a couple hundred years, so you know, whatever. This will come and go. They are not as freaked out about it, this cultural moment. Whereas here, you see Hannah Montana's back in a magazine and there is all this cultural hand wringing about it.

Adrienne: And this is approached with the same level of frenzy and information or lack there of as the health care debate. There is the same amount of attention span and passion where people are outraged and in a big pickle about it.

Neal: America is like a 19-year-old drunk girl at a party. Everything is loud and crazy and temporary, but completely impossible to ignore.

Adrienne: Tonight, you have a self-induced paparazzi party. Is this part of marketing genius scheme?

Neal: This is my \$10 idea. I had realized that the show is supposed to start and I am completely destroyed. Also this idea of paparazzi pictures of Britney Spears I wanted to have and have happen before the show. They serve as prologues to the show. The idea is that this party will be in the costumes that we wear at the top of the show. So when you show up, that's us right before we walk into DTW. We are going to take a lot of pictures. I have made us a website for the show. I'll put all of the pictures on to the website. We have also put videos up of us hanging out or slideshows of pictures that we took during runs of the show.

Adrienne: In making a website and blogging about the show, is that something you wanted to do and also marketing for your actual show?

Neal: Definitely. I was also interested in this phenomenon of cuddle parties—parties where strangers get together and spoon, hug and stuff like that. They have soft pillows and cut snacks. Maybe they talk about stuff also, but the focus is not any sort of social activity. It is just to come over and have a grown-up slumber party. And you snuggle up with these people and spoon and things with people you don't know.

Adrienne: Everyone's dressed.

Neal: Yeah, everyone's completely dressed. The idea is for it to be non-sexual. I think they originate out of the abstinence movement—what do I do with all this stuff? Well, just snuggle and talk about movies. That is what you are supposed to do. And you do it in a room full of people. What is weird about it is that a lot of them are mixed-age group type situations, all this cross-generational intimacy. Old people and younger people and teenagers and everyone's snuggling with each other. It only works if you maintain this fiction that it is completely non-sexual.

Adrienne: That is just my grandpa cuddling me.

Neal: Just spooning like you do, with random 40-year-old strangers and 16-year-olds.

Adrienne: Just snuggling. Want a cookie?

Neal: I wanted to have the audience have a lot more to do with the show. The audience is sitting on stage or a large portion of them is. And we have these parties ahead of time where we hang out with them and take pictures. It is weird how much people take pictures of each other. When you go to a bar, young people are taking pictures of each other. And when you go to concerts, everyone has their phone up recording the concert and recording themselves at the concert. We have also asked people to send in videos inspired by the show that we will show in the lobby of the theater. So that when you get there, there will be these Youtube videos that people have made. I wanted to have all of that. With Britney Spears, I saw some statistics that said: 40% or 50% of every magazine that is out has pictures of Britney Spears. 30-40% of US and People's magazines annual output is material or photographs of her. So, the idea is lots of photographs and lots of unnecessary intimacy.

Adrienne: To parallel the actual reality of a star, their blog and them commenting on themselves.

Neal: It also functions to just be fun. The fucked up thing about making a show is that the show happens for a very brief time and then it's over. This has been fun because when we were out in Portland, we

made videos of Carmine attacking a mailbox. I can watch those occasionally and can experience the show for a while beforehand, and theoretically other people can too. But I'm just thinking about myself.

Part of what I like about Britney Spears is that we are from the same region, the same accent and religion.

Adrienne: Is she from western Louisiana?

Neal: No. She is from half way through Louisiana. But that whole belt of Louisiana and eastern Texas and southern Arkansas are all similar.

Adrienne: Do you ever start making a piece not based on a person?

Neal: They used to be much more generally themed. What I would do and this is what I still do now, is have a variety of preoccupations at the time. As they start to pop up, they start to intuitively feel like a show is in there somewhere. That is what definitely happened with all of this. I started looking at Hannah Montana merchandise. I was fascinated by the colors and the look of the merchandise. And then I heard about the cuddle parties and I saw some footage of them on television. And then I saw an episode of Freaks and Geeks, which I have never watched. Then I re-watched The Other Sister, which is about these mentally disabled characters. In movies, mentally disabled people are portrayed as these very pure people. And thinking about that book, The Idiot. Then two years ago, Brendan told me that Britney Spear's new album was really good. Then I chose her as a person who would be interesting to make a show about, especially after the Prince show. Because it would be so over-exposed. I would make a show about over-exposure, which then made me think of the punk rock thing. Then everything comes together and you weed out things that obviously don't go, or in this case, the Hannah Montana stuff that became a separate show.

In the last few years, it has been instructive for me to pick a person in the process of having all these ideas, who then becomes the filter for all these ideas. The show didn't end up being about mentally disabled people because it didn't fit into the filter. But their portrayal in movies as being pure did fit because I could contrast that with who Britney Spears is and imagine her as wanting her life to be better and devoid of these things. It has become a useful choreographic tool. They then become this weird medium between you and the audience. The audience comes in knowing all about this person without wanting to know about them. All this stuff that I want to say has to come through this weird film of that person. It informs what I do and helps people connect to it. If I were to just sit around and talk about when I was a teenager, it wouldn't be interesting. It's a way of blowing it up and raising the stakes, making it iconic even. I'm trying to conflate whatever feelings or artistic interests I have with the biggest star in the world, or the most extreme emotions possible. Blow it up really big. That is what I have liked about using particular stars. I don't think I will do that forever. But for the last several years, it has been very useful to use them in this way.

Adrienne: It is interesting to hear you talk about them as more of an abstraction than I would have imagined. I had thought that you found yourself saying 'Britney is just all up in me right now'—some level of passion about the weirdness, the greatness or the goofiness. Or the inevitable guilty pleasure of that kind of person layered in with all this sort of stuff.

Neal: I grew up Pentecostal in Texas. It was a big influence to come from this church, because that was the way they approached everything. That was what it felt like to take on all this weird random stuff and get so obsessed with it. You take it and you take it really far. And you start speaking in tongues after a while and you can't handle it.

Adrienne: When I see you perform, I do see a Pentecostal imprint. Your audiences are given that possibility to not sit down and just watch. They are taken somewhere, some other place than an audience watching a performer, allowing a certain pleasure or liberation in watching.

Neal: I don't want people to be able to sit there and coolly regard something. All the emotions I am interested in that I like to feel onstage, I want the audience to feel too. My friend Lisa Carver did a party where she gave everyone nicotine patches when they walked in, so everyone will feel really antsy and freaked out. That is the funniest thing I can imagine to do at a party. 'Here's a nicotine patch' and everyone puts one on and feels crazy and speedy.

Adrienne: Do you know what you are wearing opening night?

Neal: I bought a few little items but I can't decide which one. I definitely have enough for all three nights.

Adrienne: Lots of us know that Kanye West showed up to your Kanye West show. I recently found out that Jordan Sparks was going to watch your performance of her song, Battlefield. Do you think Britney is going to show?

Neal: I don't think so. She is on tour right now so she would not be able to make it, but I thought, 'should I email her?'

Adrienne: There is a chance that some material might make it to her.

Neal: Beyoncé's guitar player came to the Beyoncé show, and was into it. She has seen the clips of the show.

Adrienne: I had thought of a reality show where you would introduce the freak to the mainstream and they would watch the freak's performance. And you'd show footage of the real person. And those two people would have to work together to come up with a performance by the end of the show.