

*Choreographers Devynn Emory and Faye Driscoll discuss Faye's creative process in her work, *There is so much mad in me*, which had its second run at Dance Theater Workshop in September 2010.*

Faye Driscoll
in conversation with Devynn Emory

Devynn Emory: Let's start by asking about your latest piece, *There is so much mad in me*. I'm curious about how you engage your performers in the process. I noticed that your performers are quite vulnerable and open on stage. That's really refreshing to see. I'm wondering what the rehearsal process is like to get people to that point of comfort.

Faye Driscoll: I do a huge amount of improvising. It's a daily practice. It's hard for me to say exactly how I get people there because it's a really innate part of my work. There's a lot that was edited out of the work. If the connections weren't being made, it didn't get into the piece.

I really work with each individual—what they're available for. Sometimes there's pushing that goes on in that, because I really think it's in there and I keep harping on it until it comes out. Other times, when it doesn't want to go there, that doesn't make it into the work.

It's like the back and forth of a directorial process and then what is organically present in the room or what is sitting there in someone, full of potential, waiting to be tapped or come out . . . what's super evident and the way the chemistry in the room is with all the different people. Sometimes it's scary because my relationship to the material is so hands-on in that way. I feel there's a real interdependence happening in the creation process. It seems trite to say something like you're working with clay and then a head emerges and you start to understand what it is, but it does feel like that. Not that I'm the masterful person manipulating them, but it does feel like I'm seeing what emerges and taking it somewhere. It's hard to sometimes describe, but there's not one formula for that process.

Devynn: It sounds a little like group therapy.

Faye: The intention is really different than group therapy. There's [a group therapy] aspect of it, because my work is very emotional and psychological. We do talk about the things we're most afraid of, because that's one of the things I'm always motivated by in my work: What am I

most afraid of? What do I not want to expose to people? And then going into that and trying to explore that. I'm asking my performers to do the same. There's a process of trust that comes, and I'm really interested in the whole human being in the work so a lot of who they are is coming into play but so is form and tempo and score and craft.

Devynn: In that vulnerability, I've noticed themes of people exploring each other's bodies—pushing each other's emotional bodies and maybe even physical boundaries. Sexuality seems to be a theme that's explored. Can you talk about that as an interest in this piece?

Faye: I feel like it has to do with corporeality and death and dealing with a physical medium. It's unavoidable. I'm interested in this authenticity of all aspects of humanity. That's just always something that emerges in the work. It's not because I want to work with sex. It's just that's it's something is innate in dealing with my body and other people's bodies. It would feel false to deny that. In *There is so much mad in me* there was a very direct exploration of sex, because I was exploring it in relationship to all these other states of consciousness—in relationship to violence, religious fervor, ecstatic state of sport. We explored the transitions between sexual ecstasy to you-just-won-the-game to religious fervor back into an orgasm. We were tracking the closeness and the distance between all of those sensations.

Devynn: And they're all pretty close, surprisingly.

Faye: Yeah. Surprisingly close.

Devynn: I want to ask you about the particular stage in your last piece [*There is so much mad in me*] of the talk show scenario. It stood out to me because I felt a bit of relief in it. There were these hints and cues of sexuality and exploration, and then it was just outright like "Let's talk about our vaginas."

Faye: [The talk show] is also a format that we're all very familiar with.

Devynn: We're comfortable, but you're also pushing everyone's boundaries because you're being very upfront about it.

Faye: It was the most escapist part of the work even though I was subverting the form of the talk show [in] the way it was edited, cropped, and re-done. I also wanted to offer people that face of "Here's what we do. Here's how we escape. We escape by voyeur-ing upon other people's

experiences.” . . . noticing when we think people are sympathizing, when we think people are freaks, what relief we are getting and why.

One of the most important things about the talk show is where it lives inside the rest of the work. [It's] not that it was a talk show, but that it came after Jacob [Slominski] yelling at everyone and then everyone singing. How do we pave over the vulnerability? I didn't really answer your question.

Devynn: You did. I was mostly curious about that theme, because it felt really distinct from the rest. You were playing with exploring each other's bodies and sexuality and then talking about those bodies and body parts.

Faye: It's that obsession with identity and how to identify and anyone who is identifying differently from what might be considered the "norm". Culturally, we're obsessed with deviance. A lot of the material in that talk show is sourced from actual talk shows. I wanted to call attention to the absurdity of it and recontextualize it. [It's] not on a screen, not edited in the same way you might see it and not with the same distance you might have in watching it on a flat screen.

Devynn: That scene and Jacob's scene of having everyone get down and screaming at the audience both were [disrupting] that comfort level. We're used to reality TV, we're used to talk shows, but now we're actually in it. By going to the show, we're surprised that we're in this sort of situation. I'm very curious about the safety of that and pushing that boundary. I'm sure you've thought about it a lot. How did people respond to that?

Faye: I'm interested in a sense of danger, a sense of mortality, calling that out from people in their live performance experience, and a questioning I have in making that work about culpability. How do I experience all of these images in this world as it is now, on a daily level? [I] reject a lot of it, absorb a lot of it unconsciously. How am I processing all of this information on a daily basis and on what level am I participating even when I think I'm not or I think I'm above it? [I think] "I would never do that. Who are these people out there exploiting themselves? Who are these people who torture people?" The them-ing. I wanted to call attention to the fact that we're all doing this and we're all participating. There is no "them" over there. [I wanted to] give people a really felt experience of participating in that in the room.

Devynn: I was going to ask about New York vs. Philadelphia and recognizing how prominent it seems that exploring vulnerability, bodies,

sexuality, gender-bending are our themes right now. I think you just answered it for me about how if you're really exploring everything, it's just sort of inherent to the work. It does seem that New York downtown artists are exploring that [vulnerability and sexuality] more and more. Because we're coming out of the obsession with reality TV, is that influencing us? [Do] we want to keep going and keep pushing past that and exposing it in our artwork? Do you think that has influenced us or do you think we're just in a moment of why-not-explore-everything and explore humanity?

Faye: I think there's so much to gender and identity politics and flipping it on its head in a really overt way that happened in the 80's and 90's. That [concern with gender/identity politics] is becoming more integrated and an innate part of people's processes. [I don't] have to put a woman in a suit or a man in a dress. We're getting to more complexity around it. If you're intelligently questioning identity in your process and you're working with human bodies, that's going to come up. I certainly think we're all influenced by what's going on in the media.

I'm really interested in vulnerability, authenticity, and complexity of human experience in performance. Offering the viewer permission for their own humanity and their own complexity and perhaps something they can identify that they might not have identified yet or might not have found an acceptable space for in their daily life or something disturbing that they recognize and might not want to recognize. Even though I tend to be interested in things that might be uncomfortable or disturbing to people, ultimately my intention is for some kind of liberation. I do feel like I have a very compassionate intention behind my work but that doesn't look like lovey-dovey-everybody-feel-good work. For me, it looks like there are some nasty maggots under this rock, and I'm going to lift the rock at angle in which you can see them.

Devynn: I'm curious if we do get to the point where we're exploring the complexities of the human realm and we're all on the path of using non-performers on stage and talking and singing. It's a different version of pedestrian and vulnerability. What's happening to the dance world? What's happening to the composition? Clearly, we all have these skills of composing and scores and choreographing is a huge part of that, still. It's just changing the face of what these things look like, and I'm curious if this keeps going, is anyone going to be making work? Everything is kind of blending into this really interesting form.

Faye: You mean is anyone going to be making formal dance work?

Devynn: Yeah.

Faye: I feel like more is better. I don't really feel like there's one trajectory that's happening. I think a lot about ritual and what are the roots of all this stuff. In some sense, it's very rudimentary to me that these things would combine. It's funny that in our process that we find it revolutionary to integrate different artistic mediums and we call it "hybrid" or something, but really human beings were always mixing it up. Who knows? Who knows where it's all going? I don't know how to answer that.

Devynn: Yeah it's a question for myself too. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by "ritual" and the ritual in your work?

Faye: I feel a desire for [ritual] in my life . . . for feeling that I am connected to something bigger than me. But I also think that there's this need for the ritual or the desire for the event to occur. Then there's the outside-in processes, which is the container providing an experience for which people pass through and are changed by. I think this is innate in performance. In some ways, I think I am very outside-in. I am creating these very crafted and choreographed scores that have notes of emotionality, vulnerability, or chaos and then afterwards understanding the dramatic implication or meanings of that structure. Then, sometimes there's the other way where there's the need and desire and the container emerging out of that. I don't know if this is totally making sense. I think that, to me really connects the sense of human ritual because it's hard to know which comes first. Did people start moving and start pounding on rocks, and it became religious? Did they have a desire for understanding the universe and then they created these patterns to walk and move in? I think both happened, and I'm interested in that in my work and engaging with both.

Devynn: That is pretty clear.

Faye: I'm thinking a lot about my next project and each process I do, I'm identifying more what my process is. I'm identifying parts of my process that seem unconscious and trying to make them more conscious. For example, before I made [837 Venice Boulevard], I was recognizing that every piece I made seem to be about my childhood. Even though I set out thinking I was making it about something else or I would just be making it based on what I wanted to do. I'd look at it and go "Oh, that's totally about my dad and the time this happened and oh god!" So I said, "Okay, so my work is all about my childhood. I'm going to make a piece directly about my childhood, and let's see what happens." Now I feel like I've sort of moved past that in my process. It's still there, but it's not controlling me

Devynn: You feel like you kind of purged it?

Faye: I purged it, but I also understand what that is and how it's operating inside my process. I'm using it as a tool as opposed to being driven by it. I'm able pick it up when I want to. In There is so much mad in me I noticed that I'm really interested psychological states and the passage between them and the sense of identity being shifty. I wanted to do that on a group on and mob level and really address that as choreography. I attempted to do that.

Devynn: Do you think some of this [There is so much mad in me] material will carry over?

Faye: Definitely. Right now, I see my next process being really different. There can't help but be a thread.

Devynn: Do you have some big plans for your next project?

Faye: I do. I'm interested in the poignant tension between beauty, power and desire. Masculine/feminine blur of power through transcendent ritual. What we desire and why we desire it.

Devynn: Cool, I look forward! Thank you.