

Adrienne Truscott

In conversation with Marissa Perel

*Choreographer and performer, Adrienne Truscott, talked with CC co-editor, Marissa Perel while driving to help with Hurricane Sandy relief efforts in the Rockaways. They discussed Truscott's LMCC residency at Governor's Island, being alone in the studio, working with jornaleros, and the trials and travails of being a Wau Wau Sister. Truscott premiers ...Too Freedom... at the Kitchen Dec 8-9 & Dec 12-15 2012.*

Interview Date: November 9, 2012 (In Adrienne's big yellow truck with Gillian Walsh)

Marissa: So, it's your birthday.

Adrienne: Yes. A year ago today I was at a mansion in Australia performing at a music festival. I was standing among a group of girls who looked like they woke up in a magical meadow after losing their virginity to unicorns.

Marissa: [laughter].

Adrienne: You know, those girls at music festivals with the woven, Native American style headbands with their hair mussed up on purpose with full make up. The look is like the "Summer of Love." So, that was a year ago, and today I am with 2 lovely ladies on my way to help out in the Rockaways.

Marissa: I can't believe what's happened at the Kitchen.

Adrienne: 2 feet of oily water surged through the whole place. The newly built bathroom has been destroyed. The desk that is the bane of Neal Medlyn's and Gillian Walsh's existence has been swept away. One entire wall has been torn down, but everyone is working to re-build it fast. Of course it just so happens, guess who is supposed to have the next show there? Me. So, the date has had to be rescheduled. It's funny because this is the second time that I haven't been able to show.

Marissa: What is the other show that didn't work out?

Adrienne: It was called Bermuda and it was supposed to happen at P.S. 122. It was a site-specific indoor-outdoor thing that had to be canceled.

Marissa: Has it ever been performed?

Adrienne: No, one of the sites for that piece literally disappeared and then the performers couldn't reschedule to another date, so it evaporated. It was a close call, but I'm glad this new piece won't be wiped away. Its been the same issue with scheduling, though. I travel so much with the Wau Wau Sisters that it's hard to nail down time to rehearse with people, so the piece utilizes a lot of different people that have been available at the random times when I have, including whomever is working at the Kitchen during my run.

I had a one month residency at Governor's Island this Summer, and I started asking day laborers to come into the studio and work with me, instead of say landscaping or painting. So, they'd come in and dance with me in the studio.

Marissa: Will they be in the performance at the Kitchen?

Adrienne: Yes, they will.

Marissa: What is the process of working with them like?

Adrienne: I didn't work daily with them - they know what they are being asked to do before they show up, on the day of the performance. They are paid the hourly wage or going rate they are paid by contractors. Likewise, other people who appear in the dance or work at The Kitchen are paid the hourly wage they normally make for their 'day jobs'.

Marissa: How does that relate to the title of your show '...Too Freedom...'?

Adrienne: Well, I was at Governor's Island doing this amazing residency in this beautiful studio, and I had never had a residency before. I thought, "I'll make this piece this month before I go on tour." But then none of my usual collaborators could come, and I was alone. No one would know if I went there or I didn't. I'm not the kind of person who walks into a studio and says, 'and now I will dance!' It felt like I had too much freedom for it to be useful. Years ago, I had a Chinese acrobatics instructor and he would say, mostly of Sarah Michelson - we were all with LAVA at the time.

Marissa: When?

Adrienne: A century ago! No, more like 12-13 years ago. I would say that Sarah Michelson in her intellectual and psychological make-up is not a natural acrobat. I don't know if she actually enjoyed doing, but it made us laugh a lot. The teacher didn't speak English so well, but he had these phrases that he would deploy. He'd say 'too freedom' to Sarah. She and I then adopted it as our own when we felt we were indulging in or presented with too much freedom - or thought we beheld someone else having 'too much freedom' - it became our social and personal vernacular.

[laughter]

I kept hearing his voice in my head during the Summer residency. It was hard to be there by myself for hours and hours on end without constraints.

Marissa: That's hard for me, too.

Adrienne: Is it hard for you, Gillian?

Gillian: Well, I dance by myself all the time, but not to make something.

Adrienne: Right, like, it just feels forced. I had to go into my Deborah Hay brain of just starting in some way, and then just keep going. I was making jokes to myself on my recent tour (with the Wau Wau's) that I'm not spending enough time rehearsing this piece. Like, "Well, it can always be an improvised solo!" And now I feel like that is what I'm doing. It embodies the title most. I just work on it whenever I have free time where I'm touring, and that doesn't depend on anyone.

Marissa: Does that feel like it goes against your acrobatic training?

Adrienne: Well, I have a dance background where I learned improvisation and I used to do it. The older I got, the more I veered away from it. There's not a lot of performed improvisation that I enjoy, but now I'm going for it.

Marissa: Where did you train?

Adrienne: I studied dance at Wesleyan University, where the focus was more on composition than technique. Then I moved to New York to be in the kind of improvy-Judson scene. I got whisked away in the acrobatics, circus world, and kept going with that. I worked with Sarah

Michelson and David Neumann, and made my work on the side. Then I developed the Wau Wau sisters with Tanya Gagne 12 years ago.

Marissa: Would you characterize the Wau Wau Sisters as performance art? You talk and sing in your performances as well as performing trapeze and acrobatics.

Adrienne: Yes. I often describe our work as 'circus-comedy-cabaret.' That description makes me want to vomit, but it is the best for what we do. It's a performance art piss-take on all those genres, which is rarely noticed here in NY, but has many nomadic homes abroad. I think New Yorkers take its showiness at face value, but there is always more beneath the surface.

[We pause to take in the destruction in the Rockaways, looking at a block of storefronts burned to the ground. We park on the street nearby and Gillian leads us to Occupy Sandy workers. For more, read my recent Art21 blog post on the experience].

En route back to Brooklyn:

Marissa: What's one of the hardest venues you've ever performed at?

Adrienne: Well, Tanya and I have had an ongoing gig on a cruise for lesbians. It sounds like it would be all cute and empowering but it's actually one of the most conservative audiences we have ever dealt with. For many of the women there, it's the only place where they are "out," there are many Southerners and Midwesterners on the cruise. It's totally surprising. I totally it would be like Michfest, but nope!

We've had audience members walk out of a show there because we did a parody on Catholic school girls. I was like, "If you're that religious, what are you doing on this boat? It's not like I'm going to tell the Pope on you!"

Adrienne: On our recent trip to Australia we actually had a death threat.

Marissa: What? How is that possible?

Adrienne: It had never happened before. Some misogynist-religious-extremist was threatening to kill me and Tanya and our audience members if the show was allowed to proceed. We had a full-on security detail and armed officers in the theater every night. Metal detectors were at the doors.

Marissa: But why? Because of nudity? Use of religious symbols?

Adrienne: The name of the show "The Last Supper," and on the flier is an image of a fish, a bible, grapes, and us naked with the words covering our body parts. It was a target for an extremist. Meanwhile, if you ever want to get a posh hotel upgrade, and an escort, get yourself a death threat!