

Batty Bwoy

HARALD BEHARIE

Where a body cannot hide



Marina Srnka
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A particular kind of silence takes hold when a body writhes in public. It is unlike the buzz aroused by athletic virtuosity or the reverence for abstract precision. The air gets thick with tension when a naked body is trembling and panting in front of others. That is what the Norwegian-Jamaican Harald Beharie does in ‘Batty Bwoy’: he confronts us with his tall, lean and naked, queer and Black male body in all its fleshy insistence.

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Batty Bwoy is a Jamaican slur for a queer person. The term is rooted in a deeply male-dominated, heteronormative, and aggressively homophobic culture. It is used to shame, humiliate, and endanger queer men. This imagery is strongly present in popular culture, like dancehall music where violence against queer bodies is not just ‘normal’ but even celebrated. Songs like Buju Banton’s infamous ‘Boom Bye Bye’ underscore the murderous implications: homosexuals

are seen as deviant, their bodies rendered monstrous and disposable. Beharie's work confronts this violent context head-on. He transforms the slur into a visceral exploration of the vulnerability and resistance of the body, ultimately challenging the forces that seek to erase him.

Eschewing a conventional staging, the audience is incorporated into the scenography. It is seated around the edges of the space but also on several platforms positioned in its centre, right in front of a red table-sculpture designed by Karoline Bakken Lund and Veronica Bruce. This table is the only 'prop' in this otherwise sparse arena. Everything is within arm's reach, with no fourth wall to shield us from what is about to transpire. The light is neutral and revealing. Every member of the audience is perfectly visible, and throughout the performance this intimate awareness of the presence of everyone in the room is intensified. The setup has the feel of a shared ritual, or even a séance.

When Beharie enters and moves calmly to the centre, he is bare-skinned except for a wig of white braids, knee pads and sneakers. The wig obscures his face for much of the piece, like a veil. He sits on his knees in twerk position: head bowed and butt high, a posture he returns to repeatedly. From some angles, his behind evolves into a creature of its own, with its own confrontational and naked agency. Throughout 'Batty Bwoy', the body remains fragmented, turned inside out, reoriented toward the gaze, transformed by it. It reminds me of works such as Xavier Le Roy's 'Self-Unfinished' or Mette Ingvartsen's 'Manual Focus': both works play with fluid identities and transformations. From this inverted pose, he begins to move—sliding, twitching and thrusting, then plunging his fingers into his mouth. He gags, he spits, he wipes the liquid on his thigh. Again, and again: spit, spread, repeat. He softly caresses the shining wet skin.

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The first time I saw Beharie's piece performed in the industrial space of Bergen's Kjøtt's factory, the performance flowed over with raw and uninhibited spatial abandon. At STUK, the tighter perimeter curbs that wildness. Beharie's choreography, always meticulous, must now operate within precise boundaries. Every slide and sidestep seems sharpened by the spatial limitations. The body becomes a machine of calculation, constantly re-orienting itself in relation to the viewer. A different kind of violence is exposed in the contained movements and strict geometrical logic. He cannot afford to falter.

Faltering however is part of the language here. There is grotesquerie, exhaustion, loss of control. Beharie crawls, moving in recognisable queer movement idioms such as twerking and later, when standing upright, voguing accompanied with body undulations. It pulsates with a certain degree of proud ownership that is as well consumed with shame and fear. The result is an oscillation between inherited trauma and emancipative affirmation of his physicality. He lies on the red table, dances on it, thrusts himself against it. With every grimace, he skirts the edge of too-muchness. Too exposed. Too sexual. Too performative. Too dangerous. And yes, the danger is real. He stares at us—deeply, accusingly, invitingly. He comes close, sits beside us, brushes past. One spectator leaves, others giggle awkwardly. The room tightens. This isn't just a performance. It's an ambush.

Later in the piece, Beharie finally reveals his face. He removes the wig. For a moment, he simply breathes. Sweat glistens. This stillness is not a moment of rest; it is a revelation. He is not performing now. Or rather, he is performing vulnerability, which is even more terrifying. But from that moment, it is as if something within him had awakened.

José Esteban Muñoz called queerness 'an ideality', a mode of becoming, a 'horizon imbued with potentiality'. Beharie's body enacts that potential, but not toward utopia. Instead, he stays in the muck. He works within the beatings, disappointments and defeats of being: the contradictions of being read as hypermasculine while desiring softness, being Black and therefore already othered, being queer and therefore surveilled and distrusted. 'Batty Bwoy' stages masculinity as a drag, as residue. What sticks to the skin when you try to shed what masculinity demands. The repetition of pelvic movement becomes not just erotic but symbolic. Over and over again, he returns to the pose: four-legged, thighs open, balls visible. Sometimes on the limits of becoming monotonous, but the tension remains.

Halfway through, the sound shifts: horror-film synths reminiscent of Goblin's Italian Giallo scores, written specially for this piece by the Norwegian prog-rock band 'Ring van Möbius', meet jazz rhythms and then something close to classical music. The score doesn't necessarily match the dance. It rather warps it. At one moment, he moves with elastic micro-isolations to a pulsating rock soundscape, tongue protruding, a demonic possession. In another, he gallops around the circle, joyous, hopeful. However, at certain instances, I did wonder if this musical collage was well integrated with the corporality, or it was simply a distraction.

He twerks—violently, euphorically—his head disappearing between his legs, the platform trembling beneath him.

To think through Beharie's performance is to think about performance as method. That is, performing not to demonstrate a fixed identity, but to test its limits. To show that Black queer life is not static but experimental, tactical, fluid and embodied in contradiction. And, to follow Tavia Nyong'o's claims about 'Afro-fabulation', Beharie's '*Batty Bwoy'* engages with Black radical potential of undoing, of unbecoming, of excess, of aesthetic risk. The stage becomes a site of minor transgressions that accumulate into a political poetics. Beharie doesn't represent deviance. He choreographs its potential, exploring what it can reveal.

This methodological freedom is also evident in his intimate absorption of the environment where he performs in, the reaction of the audience and their role as 'co-creators'. Here, I must emphasise an observation that quite struck me. When I saw this piece in Bergen, the audience was scarce, and highly specialized. (That is, the kind of audience you'll find in a dance festival on the fringes: a tight-knit community of passionate dance lovers.) At STUK, the audience was larger, and consisted mainly of elderly white men. Consequently, the intensity of Beharie's performance changed, and his exposure was more palpable.

In a long climactic scene, he mounts the table. He twerks—violently, euphorically—his head disappearing between his legs, the platform trembling beneath him. The entire structure shakes as the body shakes violently. Something breaks here. It's obscene, ecstatic, beautiful, ugly—alive.

In the end, we are not offered any type of catharsis. There is no closure, only exposure. No final form, only transformation, an undoing of what has been violently imposed. Masculinity is not performed here as an identity, but as exorcism. In its place, Beharie offers a body that is porous, trembling, and alive. Not symbolic. Not archetypal. Just flesh, in motion. It is not an easy work. It is not a digestible work. But it does feel as a necessary one.