



## Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /  
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-  
speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /  
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British  
Literature and Culture**

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# American Realness Festival—January 2015

Festival Review

Jacob Gallagher-Ross

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7634>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.7634

ISSN: 2108-6559

### Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

### Electronic reference

Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "American Realness Festival—January 2015", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 21 July 2015, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7634> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.7634>

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## General Information on the Festival and the Shows

- 1 American Realness website: <http://americanrealness.com/>  
Show 1: *Age & Beauty Part 2: Asian Beauty @ the Werq Meeting or The Choreographer & Her Muse or &@&*, Miguel Gutierrez  
Cast: Miguel Gutierrez, Michelle Boulé, Ben Pryor and Sean Donovan  
Lights: Lenore Doxsee  
Music: Miguel Gutierrez, Jaime Fenelly, Pee in My Face with Surgery (Jaime Fenelly & Fritz Welch), Chris Forsyth, Neal Medlyn, Ryoji Ikeda, KC and the Sunshine Band  
Sound Production/Assistance: Leo Martin  
Projection design: Miguel Gutierrez and Leo Martin  
Production Management: Sarah Lurie  
Costume Consulting: Ásta Hostetter  
Costume Construction: Dusty Childers  
Miguel Gutierrez website: <http://www.miguelgutierrez.org/pieces/age--beauty-part-2/>
- 2 Show 2: *The Mother and Other Plays, My Barbarian*  
Cast: Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade  
Script: Alexandro Segade  
Masks: Jade Gordon  
Score: Malik Gaines  
Backdrops: Alexandro Segade  
Set Design: My Barbarian  
Video Design and Production: My Barbarian and Robert Hickerson  
Production Manager: Robert Hickerson  
My Barbarian website: <http://www.mybarbarian.com/>

3 Show 3: *Fest*, Ivo Dimchev

Cast: Dolores Hulan, Sandra Wieser, Mirko Feliziani, Ivo Dimchev

Text: Ivo Dimchev

Light design: Giacomo Gorini

Music: Emilian Gatsov

Production of Humarts Foundation and Volksroom Brussels; Co-produced by Impulstanz Vienna, Kaaitheater Brussels, Frascati Amsterdam

Ivo Dimchev website: <http://www.ivodimchev.com/>

## Review

### Nice Work If You Can Get It

4 Negotiating labor with Miguel Gutierrez, My Barbarian, and Ivo Dimchev at the 2015 American Realness Festival

5 Work was on artists' minds at this year's American Realness Festival, the annual extravaganza of edgy performance, hosted by Abrons Arts Center on New York's Lower East Side, that has quickly become one of New York's boldest and most vibrant exhibitors of new live art. And it wasn't just the labor of performance that artists were investigating—the hard physical and mental work of getting a performance right in front of an audience night after night—though, of course, that was part of it. Instead, several pieces meditated on the often-unseen industry that allows the art to reach the stage at all: the curation, the grant-writing, the scheduling, the marketing, the touring, the teching, the negotiating—even the day jobs (teaching, leading workshops) that sustain artists while they steal time to rehearse, and the affective labor of charming artistic directors and wooing new gigs. For artists straddling today's hyper-competitive labor and art markets, there's nothing more real than that.

6 The baroquely-titled *Age & Beauty Part 2: Asian Beauty @ the Werq Meeting or The Choreographer & Her Muse or &:@&*, choreographer Miguel Gutierrez's melancholy hymn to arts admin, juxtaposed two kinds of retrospection about career-defining relationships. Dancer Michelle Boulé, who has been a constant presence in Gutierrez's group pieces since 2001, appeared onstage to represent the embodied knowledge of his oeuvre she has accumulated over their years of collaboration—she danced a wild solo drawn from earlier work, and huddled with Gutierrez for short conversations indicative of so many others they've conducted in rehearsal studios. But this kind of collaboration was juxtaposed with another, less obvious, but no less vital, kind: Gutierrez's years-long relationship with his manager, advocate, and all-around consigliere Ben Pryor—Pryor also curates the American Realness festival. In dialogue drawn from transcripts of actual work meetings between the two of them, Gutierrez pointed to another kind of dance, equally intricate, equally artful: a durational choreography of time, money, and opportunity that has allowed Gutierrez to pursue a career in contemporary performance—this sense of scheduling as performance, as choreography, is literalized later in the piece, when Pryor starts dancing, too. At times almost despairing about the straitened economic circumstances attending the artist's life, *Age and Beauty* nevertheless affirmed its intangible value through the obdurate devotion of true believers like Pryor. Werqing is hard work.

- 7 The most revelatory moment in art-performance ensemble My Barbarian’s timely reimagining of Brecht’s agit-prop classic *The Mother*—in which an un-political peasant woman is progressively radicalized by witnessing the mistreatment of workers, including her own child—came when the performers temporarily suspended the action to address the audience directly on the subject of pedagogy. The play, of course, is one of Brecht’s *Lehrstucke*—teaching-and-learning plays designed to acquaint participants with divergent points of view through participation. Here, My Barbarian took the opportunity to hold a teach-in about teaching—the play features a cynical teacher character, whose rote methods are contrasted with the experiential learning pursued by *The Mother*—and by extension, the play’s spectators. The performers asked audience members to indicate, by show of hands, how many of them earned at least part of their living by teaching. Many, many, hands in the audience went up—American Realness attracts an art savvy crowd of artists, intellectuals and academics. The Barbarians then asked how many people felt their employment was secure. Many hands dropped. The moment came as a stark reminder that university teaching has become, for many, a precarious occupation—particularly in the arts. Brecht’s learning-and-teaching play was deployed to remind its audience that teaching itself is a flashpoint for labor politics in today’s America—one of its most contentious.
- 8 The hidden labor of theater-making returned again with the violence of long repression in *Fest*, Ivo Dimchev’s satirical dystopia about theater festival culture. Dimchev, a perennial fixture on the European festival circuit, and, increasingly on the New York scene as well, is intimately familiar with the various kinds of weirdness germane to itinerant performing. In scenes of mounting absurdity, Dimchev staged the theater world’s lizard brain: a beleaguered performance artist—also called Ivo—enacts the implicit seduction of the curator-performer relationship by performing vigorous—and microphone amplified—cunnilingus on a frosty festival programmer; fellates an unhelpful technician to get some time to tech a show; and dies a painful death at the hands of a pedantic critic—only to rise from the dead, and as a zombie, suffer through a lengthy, obtuse post-show discussion.
- 9 Besides being very funny, these antics unveil—albeit in grotesque form—the extraordinary affective labor required to get a show onstage at performance festival: curators must be wooed, technicians mollified, critics flattered, querulous audience members indulged. Not to mention the travel, the packing and unpacking, the grind of self-care in a succession of hotel rooms. All for those few fleeting moments of performance: when Ivo simulates “Ivo”’s festival performance, he does so by muttering its text—and his concurrent emotional subtext—double-time, accompanied by a weird, hasty dance. Performance is short; the work that gets it onstage is long.
- 10 There are many familiar reasons to explain this preoccupation. The American economy is limping into recovery, but New York City has never been more expensive—which means that artists must be uncannily resourceful if they hope to sustain themselves while making stridently anti-commercial art. The old day jobs aren’t enough. Experimental performance requires serious creative entrepreneurship now. That it does persist—stubbornly, maybe quixotically— is close to heroic. It’s good work if you don’t weaken.

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## ABSTRACTS

Performance review, January 2015

American Realness Festival, January 8<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> 2015

Critique théâtrale, janvier 2015

Festival American Realness, 8-18 janvier 2015

## INDEX

**Subjects:** Theater

**Keywords:** performance review, art industry, American economy, agit-prop, experimental performance

**Mots-clés:** critique théâtrale, industrie culturelle, économie américaine, agit-prop, expérimentation artistique

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