

WRITERS CORPS PROFILE: EZRA DICKINSON Oct 31, 2016

by Michelle Peñaloza

*This season, an Ambassador Writers Corps Member will write a profile on each of the nine local artists in 16/17. These in-depth conversations between local artists and local writers will take the place of curatorial notes in the performance programs.*

Before becoming an OtB writing ambassador, before researching his work online, I saw Ezra Dickinson dance on my flight from SeaTac to SFO. I scanned through Alaska Airlines' free channels, uncommitted to whatever book I'd brought for the flight, and found a series of SIFF shorts. [One in particular](#), *Dinosaurs and Sea Hawks*, I found incredibly touching. The short film follows a man sleeping beneath a bridge. Upon waking, he walks to Pioneer Square, puts on his mask (really, a dinosaur helmet), and dances gingerly among folks walking up and down the street. A woman takes notice of him, dances with and around him, placing her Seahawks cap on his knee, upon his melancholy dinosaur head. Dance complete, they exchange mask and cap. The diligent tenderness and openness captured in this piece, I found in Ezra Dickinson as we met for the first time and spoke about craft, our mothers, our work ethics, the merits of being busy, and the language of bees.

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Ezra Dickinson is an artist open to serendipity, to the vibrations beyond and in between the scope of spoken language. When I asked what language is to him as a dancer, Ezra spoke of dance's contrast to the directness of words, of his searching for a way to communicate more clearly beyond known landmarks, and his interest in that which is fleeting, in "what we can understand for now."

Trained in ballet from a young age, Ezra spoke of rebelling against those years of study in some ways, citing his interest in lessons that were glossed over in ballet and interrogating the idea that there are certain parts of the body that are more beautiful than others. He spoke of “abstracting the body” outside of tradition. Our conversation sprawled over a number of topics, the two of us connecting and finding affinity as only children with complicated family lives and as artists interested in landscape and collaboration and human connection.

Ezra describes his pieces as gifts for his schizophrenic mother, as invitations for others to share in processing the impacts of mental illness, as ways of creating community for that which is often stigmatized, untreated, or ignored.

Ezra’s mother and his father will figure prominently in *Psychic Radio Star*. When I asked him if he ever worries about either of his parents’ reactions when rendering such intimate experiences, his and theirs, he smiled and said, “When I think about my mother and father...well, that’s what they get for raising an artist, right?” He talked about the challenges and negotiations of creating such intensely personal works; a question he often asks: “Is it OK for me to say this?” Ezra spoke of how his pieces, and *Psychic Radio Star*, in particular, are his memories, his side of the story. Ultimately, this show will be a ritual and a broadcast for his mother, one which we will be privy to, but are not the primary audience for.

When speaking of the origin of the show, Ezra shared his mother’s reply when he shares his life and successes as an artist: “I’m famous, too. I’m a Psychic Radio Star.” For Ezra, this show is a safe imagining of who his mother might be on another plane, in another dimension, rather than a digesting or processing of who she was in the past. This work, he said, is a

celebration of the shaman she is. It is a celebration of magic and imagination.

In the midst of our conversation, Ezra very gently interrupted my questioning to alert me of a hovering bee. This led to a quick tangent, in which he told me about a bee-keeping friend of his, who told him to listen for the change in pitch and hum of the bees as he misted them with sugar water. This image from our conversation stays with me: a hive humming as a cloud, glistening with sweet water. Ezra Dickinson's work strikes me as analogous in effect—harrowing and beautiful, subtle and intuitive, full of diligence and reward and magic and new ways to notice and sing.

**Michelle Peñaloza** is the author of *landscape/heartbreak* (Two Sylvias Press) and *Last Night I Dreamt of Volcanoes* (Organic Weapon Arts). Her poetry and essays have been featured in *Poetry Northwest*, *New England Review*, *Off Paper*, *Vinyl*, *The Collagist*, and *Verse Daily*. She is the recipient of fellowships and awards from Kundiman, 4Culture, and Artist Trust, as well as scholarships from VONA/Voices, Vermont Studio Center, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, among others.