

## No Two Performances Will Be the Same

Ezra Dickinson's New Piece About Mental Illness, His Mother, and the Streets of Seattle

Written by Melody Datz Hansen: MAY 8 2013



Photo by KELLY O

A cyclist almost hits a parked car straining his neck to watch Ezra Dickinson tour jeté down Stewart Street. Dickinson is not tall, but his long arms and high balletic leaps and jumps cut through the apathetic throng of people hanging around outside of the Greyhound bus station. The loiterers perk up and watch—interested or confused or amused or all of the above. Whether they want to or not, they've become part of Dickinson's stage.

An audience of 20 or so people is across the street, wearing headphones. Pedestrians pass through the clump of audience members, some of them glancing over to see what we are looking at, but most just padding on with a "meh, whatever" expression on their tired, post-workday faces. Meanwhile, a guy in a loud, violent metal shirt starts to pop and lock next to Dickinson, but sees that he's outmatched and goes back to his cigarette. It's opening night of this performance, and there's a TV camera in our group, recording parts of it. As Dickinson

crosses the street from the bus station to the plaza in front of the US Courthouse, some passersby cross with him, immortalized at that moment as part of a living work of art. I hope they think it's cool. It's pretty fucking cool.

As soon as Dickinson is moving in and out of the trees in front of the courthouse, I realize we've amassed a crowd. Now even people who don't have headphones are trying to follow along. The monologue streaming through our headphones in between pumping music matches the poetic phrases written on a thick white ribbon that Dickinson, in rolled-up trousers and a thick woolen plaid shirt, slowly pulls out from inside his clothing, phrases like "MY MOTHER HAS WET THE BED SHE WAS PUT IN." He weaves the ribbon, marked with large black block letters, among a cluster of soft white birch trees in front of the courthouse. Cars along Seventh Avenue pause for long moments even after the lights turn green, eyes fixated on Dickinson's slight figure. When Dickinson at last lets go of the end of the ribbon, the poem slackens, becoming part of the breeze-blown landscape and fading into the late afternoon background of commuters, roaring buses, and street debris.

Dickinson set this performance piece, *Mother for you I made this*, on the very streets of downtown Seattle where his mother, for a brief time, made her home—"Just trying to survive among human destruction." To call this piece "performance art" seems to do it a disservice, as that only brings to mind the most disingenuous kind of

Tilda-Swinton-sleeping-in-a-clear-box-at-MoMA art. But Dickinson is a bona fide artist, incredibly diverse in his talents but especially gifted as a dancer and a street artist. He's also a theater artist, a musician, and a poet. He makes films and sculpture. He's equally at home in a concert hall and in a dusty parking garage.

Produced as part of Velocity Dance Center's *Made in Seattle* series, *Mother for you I made this* is a delicately constructed work of art about Dickinson's childhood, his mother, and, seemingly, the roles they played in his development as an artist and as a man. As he tells it, the roles of parent and child in his upbringing were not as clearly defined as we expect them to be: a mother who is always around to protect us, to make sense of the absurd and frightening, to tell us that we are loved and valued, to let us play and be kids. Dickinson's mother is mentally ill, was homeless for a time, and is now housed at some unknown state hospital. She does not permit visits, not even from her son. Through *Mother*, Dickinson explores that lost connection, but he does so without self-pity or any sort of whine. Above all, this is a piece about a love so big and forgiving and pure that the art through which the story is told cannot help but be genuine.

Through dance, film, poetry, monologue, improvisation, and puppetry, Dickinson communicates without being the least bit saccharine, a feat I attribute to a pristine, natural technical ability to move his body, as well as equally matched qualities of spirit and intellect.

*Mother* is ongoing, running every evening at 7 p.m. until May 19—and the run will go longer if there's a demand. No two shows will be the same. That's the beauty of outdoor performance; as an artist, you have no control save your choreography, your production plans, and your knowledge of the surfaces and buildings that surround you. Every car that passes by will be new; every pedestrian will have an unpredictable reaction. One of the vehicles that pass Dickinson in an alley on opening night is a truck that looks like it's just been in an accident. The piece ends in a small, bricked-in park off of Seventh Avenue. Dickinson descends into the garden wearing a brilliantly blue dinosaur mask, crouching and pawing at the air with his arms like a T. rex. Through the mouth hole in the mask, I can see Dickinson's face, eyes almost shut

as he dances close around us, in between us, loving and thanking us and beseeching us to pay attention. Pay attention to those living in the periphery, in alleys, in hidden gardens, in front of bus stations. Pay attention to the help children so desperately need but so rarely get. "I remember carrying your limp body," Dickinson says through the recording, holding out his hands before removing the dinosaur mask and settling down to sleep under his old baby blanket under a bare tree.

"Where is your mother?" That was one question a woman asked Dickinson after the closing of his hour-long performance, a question I thought Dickinson had just finished answering. Dickinson's mom had been right there—on the downtown streets of a crazy warm May afternoon, in the alleys running through overpriced parking garages and luxury condominiums, under the well-watered birch groves in front of the courthouse. She is Dickinson, she is the audience, she is the passerby watching the audience watch Dickinson. She is art and dance and beauty and pain and ugliness and failure and success. She is our neighbor. She is us.