



***blue Nile to the galaxy around Olodumare
Jeremy Nedd & Impilo Mapantsula***

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Critics of surrealism always want to point out what they think is this deep connection between surrealism and jazz around this notion of improvisation. What's less clear is whether or not they thought in a rigorous way about what improvisation actually is. Improvisation is etymologically understood to be connected with not looking ahead with a kind of movement without foresight... but what if the movement without foresight is not because people are incapable of looking ahead or incapable of planning... what if it's because what they were always doing was looking back... this amazing combination of forward movement while looking back...

Fred Moten

thoughts from Surrealism Beyond Borders | On Black, Brown, & Beige

Abstract

On Jan 12th 2022 NASA published the first images from the James Webb Telescope of distant galaxies from over 10 billion light years ago. While the ability to capture images of ancient galaxies propel us closer to an idea of futurity, they also serve as a reminder that perhaps we are not as far along as we think. Focusing on the improvisational potential of Pantsula's movement vocabulary in response to the music of cosmic and spiritual jazz movements, our piece draws upon phenomena found in the cosmos as metaphoric inspiration - from the birth of a galaxy to the death of a star - oscillating between the lyrical jive style of Pantsula past and the blistering fast footwork of Pantsula present we contemplate this compression of space and time and our allusions of progress towards a future.

Background & Motivation

Once again along with my collaborators of Impilo Mapantsula I would like to dig deeper into topics that I feel attempt to navigate various entangled avenues of black diasporic experience through the lens of Pantsula.

Like in our previous projects, *the ecstatic* and *how a falling star lit up the purple sky*, the aim has been to bring together conceptual ideas and universes, from our respective histories - me as a Black American and the members of Impilo Mapantsula as Black South Africans - into what I hope is a productive proximity. Generating moments of foreign yet familiar juxtaposition of cultural characteristics and symbolism, just as much as it generates new questions around those cultural characteristics and symbols.

I've always been extremely fascinated with the fundamental research and science behind astronomy and cosmology. Just as much as I've always been a fan of science fiction, which is of course a product of fundamental research. Specifically, Afrofuturism could be seen as just a science fiction sub-genre, but I choose to articulate it as a liberatory gesture. The Afro-futurist element of this work is where I suppose my deepest interests reside.

How Jazz as a product and sonic embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement, and Pantsula as a product of Apartheid Era Resistance could operate in relation to recalibrate an understanding of our place in time, and perhaps how we intend to move into the future.

I would like to use this piece as a framework to reconsider the sometimes historical co-opting of narratives around the turbulent histories that produced both Jazz and Pantsula. To consider that perhaps we haven't departed as far into the future away from the circumstances that produced Jazz and Pantsula, even if we have telescopic technology that could make you think otherwise. I also hope in the end the piece can serve as a reminder that here on Earth we are also just as much a part of all that cosmic and spiritual Jazz longs for. That we too are of the cosmos, the poetry, beauty and tragedy of it all.

Sonic inspirations

Two of the jazz composers that would have a significant presence in the work are American and South African icons of the cosmic and spiritual jazz movement Alice Coltrane (d. 2007) and Bheki Mseleku (d. 2008).

Among many shared traits both were virtuosic multi-instrumentalists but grounded in piano improvisation, both have left behind a formidable catalogue of music, both experienced individual tragedy. Most interesting to me is that both referenced often in their music the cosmic. Was the latter coincidental, inspiration (Mseleku is more of a product of, as to a contemporary of Coltrane) or an honest affinity for contemplating the cosmos. Aspirations to be in accord with a felt unknown known that transcends the strife of this world through the sonic.

Though I have researched their individual histories, I have no intention to explicitly explore the histories of these two titans (even though there is a beautiful story where the two crossed paths at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1977 and Coltrane, gifted Mseleku the mouth piece that her deceased husband, Tenor Saxophone legend and one could say the the catalyzer to spiritual jazz sound John Coltrane, used to record his legendary album, A love Supreme.) My interest lies primarily in the musical legacy they left behind and how it could serve as a cosmic sonic map to improvisational understanding through Pantsula.

Through this work I hope to achieve something close to the idea of transforming and abstracting cosmic motives that if one allows could elicit a sensation akin to stargazing or even space travel. I feel the library of these two artists will be key to accessing that feeling.

Movement research

For our movement research Pantsula serves as a constant assertion of virtuosity and a mining of what is possible in and through otherwise marginalized movement

vocabularies. Grounded footwork known for its dynamic power with exemplary precision and musicality. But how does this practice connect to jazz and an almost devotional reverence to the cosmos that produced some of the most transcendental improvised music.

Improvisation is not at all necessarily new to the specific context of Pantsula. But it is a space that I and my collaborators of Impilo Mapantsula have yet to thoroughly explore together. Our interest lies not only in the movement quality that would come from improvisational research but the spatial structures and constellations that would arise from the research. Here a more pensive or “Jive”-like handling (softer, looser, almost shuffle-like approach associated with pantsulas of previous generations as to the more precise active sharp footwork that current day pantsula is known for) would be primarily utilized. When considering a “Jive” like quality as akin to an embodiment of a certain jazz sensibility, the image of “cool” and how it translates as a performativity will also be worked with. But “cool” as an emblem of jazz representing resistance.

There are many schools of thought around improvisational methods that derive from western dance forms i.e, William Forsythe’s rigorous use of ballet to employ his improvisational technologies. As pantsula is a percussive footwork based movement vocabulary, it is highly rhythmic and one could even say stands alone as a type of music generated by the body itself. I suppose the best way to articulate what I hope to achieve or at least I hope through the movement research to come closer to, is to begin to understand or even differentiate what it could be to dance on in contrast to with jazz. What an improvisational accompaniment, as to improvisational assignment could be.

Considering that up to this point, with a few exceptions, our work has been very set to music and perhaps formal in choreographic structure. I see this work as an opportunity to shake up that constant.

Stage

As aforementioned, in this work I hope to achieve something close to the idea of transforming and abstracting cosmic motives that if one allows could elicit a sensation akin to stargazing or even space travel. I feel the stage design will be integral to achieving that. Similar to our previous productions, the use textile to sculpt space present. In the name of sustainability we have already made the first steps in reacquiring a 15 by 15 textile print of a distant universe (see cover photo) that we used for a previous production in a German Staatstheater. This textile will serve as the base from which we conceptualize the remainder of the stage for this work.

Biographies

Jeremy Nedd is a Brooklyn (New York) born choreographer and performer who is currently based in Basel, Switzerland. Nedd has had engagements at the Semperoper in Dresden (2010-2012) and Ballett Basel (2012-2016). As a guest performer he is associated with Schauspielhaus Zürich, where he has worked with Trajal Harrell. Nedd has realised and presented his previous productions at Kaserne Basel, ROXY Birsfelden, Arsenic - centre d'art scénique contemporain (Lausanne), Palais de Tokyo (Paris) and Münchner Kammerspiele, amongst others.

Impilo Mapantsula is a global network of high-level professional dance artists who specialize in pantsula, a South African urban dance form. They are a professional organization that promotes the development of pantsula dance and culture, creates formal standards, and acts as an industry representative. The organization aims to document and protect the living legacy of pantsula and support dancers in professionalizing and further developing their art. Impilo Mapantsula creates learning opportunities and supports artistic creation and self-expression through educational, artistic and professional programs, with an emphasis on job creation, international collaborations and exchange programs.

Time plan

09. – 31.03.2024	pre rehearsals 2 weeks South Africa / 2 weeks Basel
29.04. – 09.05.2024	final rehearsals Brussels, Belgium
20.05.2024	technical set-up Centre Culturel Jaques Franck, Brussels
21. – 23.05.2024	final rehearsals on stage with technical equipment
24.05.2024	premiere
25. – 28.05.2024	shows 2 – 5

Further show dates

Beginning June	SPRING, Utrecht, Niederlande (tbc)
22.06.2024	Festspielhaus St. Pölten (confirmed)
July 2024	Venice in Biennale Dance Festival, Italien (tbc)
August 2024	Kampnagel Sommerfestival, Hamburg, Deutschland (confirmed)
September 2024	Kaserne Basel, Schweiz (confirmed)

Video-links to past productions

the ecstatic

full length, with different angles: <https://vimeo.com/668353806/583410503d>

full length, totale: <https://vimeo.com/759081889/bc7babdcab>

how a falling star lit up the purple sky

full length, totale: <https://vimeo.com/723234351/2499a7d3ff>

from rock to rock ...aka how magnolia was taken for granite

full length, totale: <https://vimeo.com/864968137/d835382707?share=copy>