

Allie Hankins | *The Bravest Bulls* Welcome the Fight | Andrew Hewitt's *Social Choreography*

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The Bravest Bulls Welcome the Fight by Allie Hankins was presented as a part of Sea/Port hosted at Conduit Dance Space in Portland, Oregon on June 20th and 21st in 2013. In this short entry, I would like to examine Hankins' fifteen-minute dance performance with a chapter titled "The Scandalous Male Icon – Nijinsky and the Queering of Symbolist Aesthetics" by Andrew Hewitt in his celebrated book *Social Choreography – Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*.

A long piece of red silky fabric eloquently runs diagonally from front to back, directing our perception to the depth of the space and height of ceiling. It creates an elegant curvature in the middle due to the seemingly significant weight. The audience encounters this awe-striking stage image of red flow as they enter the space. After a blackout, a bare-chested dancer appears in the down stage right corner of the space. The figure stands tall, facing towards the swirling red landscape. Casper David Friedrich's famous painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of the Fog (1818)* comes to my mind. An iconic romantic image of a figure who is about to embark on an adventurous path ahead, mirroring the society advancing towards modernity.

As the light fades in, the dancer steadily moves forward, letting gold particles on both shoulders flicker with light. The lights reveal the topless female body with her long black hair tied-up neatly. The skin-colored tights highlights her distinguished curve of the hip and slender musculature. While the figure clearly exposes her feminine physical presence, she articulates her movement in a definitive and almost aggressive manner.

This solo dancer is Allie Hankins. She is a dancer and choreographer based in Seattle and Portland. Her current research involves with life and works of a male modern dance icon: Vaslav Nijinsky. She approaches this subject with her female body and her own self-discovery. Besides from the recent attention to the hundredth anniversary of Nijinsky's scandalous ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Hankins, not only revisits the past legend of modern dance, but also personalizes the iconic figure within, in search of female and personal empowerment in the contemporary society.

Hewitt investigates Nijinsky's artistic practice through his symbolist aesthetic and queering of gender expectation. In the course of shaping modernist aesthetic pioneered by



practitioners such as Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Mary Wigman and others, “male dancers have consistently been effeminized from within the ideology of modernist performance. They slip from a position of masculine power and control exercise through cognitive knowledge into a dangerous realm of the body.” During this era of early modernism, Nijinsky’s works were scandalous, yet considered as iconic moment of modern dance. For example, the vocal reaction from outraged audience members muffled up the theater during *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) not only because of Igor Stravinsky’s violent and confrontational music but also Nijinsky’s unapologetic choreography of aggression, requiring the dancers to toe-in their movements. An American scholar Andrew Hewitt argues that Nijinsky is a scandalous icon “who demonstrated the violence that must be done to the body” in the name of embodiments and aesthetic.

In *The Bravest Bulls Welcome the Fight*, Hankins bravely moves into the space alone, owning the space with wide shoulders and open chest. At one point, she moves on this line, cross-stepping widely with distinguished stroking of both arms. Every single step weighs with stomping sounds. Then, she creates an arc with her spine inward, still carrying on the aggressive nature with a strong accent. In contrast to this rather masculine quality, there is a graceful articulation of hands and fingers.

One significant image Hankins portrays is a particular gestural movement of bullfighting: a very aggressive male-dominant spectacle from Spain. The articulated gesture of lifting and holding an imagined red fabric with her arms and shoulders is repeatedly embodied with strength and fiery gaze. Her overall androgynous quality is accentuated with this symbolic masculine gesture, alluding to the struggle and rarity of female bullfighters. Nijinsky displayed his male dancing body as an object of aesthetic pleasure in his time, refusing “a gender binarism dictating that men ‘know’ truth while women ‘embody’ it.” With additional twist, Hankins takes a feminist stance. She depicts both an iconic male dancer and female matador with her bare breasts, refusing the hetero-normative gender assignments in the western society.

After several physical contacts with the fabric with her head and hands, the curvature of her spine changes its quality from the aggressive attack to a sense of infirmity. Slowly, the body crumbles down to the ground in successions. With the image of bullfighting in mind, her change of quality leads to the image of defeated bull in slow motion. Suddenly, her body violently drops on the ground with bounce, making a startling sound of body mass as if the bull got killed in the arena. The upright confident dancing/fighting body fuses with its target: a synchronized moment between inner struggle behind the confident expression and the grotesque pain. Here, Hankins' embodiment of this aggression and pain mirrors with Nijinsky's performance of masculinity. "Nijinsky...grounds his aesthetic in the moment of inevitable rupture with nature: unless it hurts, so runs the logic, he cannot know true from false."

As she stays low on the ground, Hankins firmly grabs a red fabric draped from the ceiling, pulling towards herself. She crawls toward where she enters in the beginning as the red fabric sings frictional sounds with the metal pole on the ceiling. Wrapping her head and body with the fabric, she vacuums its spectacular past into her body. We are left with empty space with a tracing of red glory dragged out of the picture.

The Bravest Bulls Welcome the Fight celebrates multiplicity and malleability in our identities. Using ideology built around Vaslav Nijinsky's artistic career, Hankins transforms her

body into the male modern dancer, female matador, defeated bull, and her own self. It takes risk and passion to question the socially homogenized ideology. Nijinsky did his part. Civil rights movement is still in progress even after Supreme Court struck down DOMA section 3. Hankins invites us to fight with absolutist ideology, using a female matador as a symbol. At the same time, she exposes the emotional depth and pain in the visual beauty.



Hewitt, Andrew. "The Scandalous Male Icon – Nijinsky and the Queering of Symbolist Aesthetics." In *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham: Duke university Press, 2005.

Image: by curtesy of Allie Hankins