

# REVIEW: Jessica Denson and Jamal Ari Black at Dance Loft on 14

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MissJessica Denson: STATE : TRAIT

Jamal Ari Black: 768 – 160 x 2 = 2016 DEATHS

Review by Kacie Peterson

MissJessica Denson and Jamal Ari Black, both Master of Fine Arts candidates at George Washington University, presented works during the opening weekend of performances at the Dance Loft on 14 Theater on Saturday, October 1.

Dance Loft on 14's new performance space offers an intimate venue. There are no traditional wings for entrances and exits. There is no velour curtain that opens to reveal the dancers at just the right moment. There are visually exposed cords and three small light fixtures that sit at the edge of the black marley, creating the only front light.

It's a raw setting for an evening of dance sparked by conversations our communities need to have.

Denson's *STATE : TRAIT* was the first act. Eight square white sheets hung from the ceiling, not one touching the ground. They are projection screens for Denson's designs. The lights are dim. She walks across the stage between the screens, counting loudly from one to 14. She crosses the stage multiple times, seemingly growing more frustrated each time with the number of steps and her verbal counting. That's when the layers of voiceovers start.

Denson's piece brings to light the topic of mental health and the search for personal identity. While she insists verbally to the audience that she's fine, everything I witness contradicts it. The projections are images of what you'd see if you examined a cell under a microscope. The voiceovers intensify to the point where only a few phrases are distinguishable above the chatter. She holds newspapers in her hands, asking the audience for a seven letter word defined by severe mood shifts. She silently mouths, "I am not okay."

She builds a repertoire of contractions and sharp movement, floor work phrases with full leg extensions. She beats her thighs with her fists and she pulls her hand away from her face in the direction of the audience. The speed and effort behind the movement is directly reflective of the subject matter. There are moments of clarity, and there are moments of exhaustion. Denson's repetitive phrase work is effective in this piece, not only as a choreographic tool, but as a means to portray living with a mental illness.

The stage goes black and we're greeted by a turbulence announcement by a flight attendant on Life Air. She explains that the feelings of sadness, worthlessness, paranoia, and excessive goal-directed activity are products of being human. The voice insists that if we feel something, we should say something. We have a collective responsibility to take care of one another.

A crocodile teeter-totter slides across the stage. Denson comes back onstage in a black onesie with the bones of a skeleton. She proceeds to step on both ends of the toy and balances, though quickly toppling off. Her behavior is childlike as she kisses the face of the crocodile on the seat. Though

perhaps her behavior isn't childlike at all. Perhaps she's simply expressing a glee that we don't generally allow adults to express?

The projections change to white noise – the kind that popped up on the television when you were a kid and changed the channel to one you didn't receive. White noise has always put me on edge. The white noise intensifies the anxious feelings Denson is expressing. She's agitated and uncomfortable, but I can't figure out how to help her. Not yet, anyway.

Denson shouts to the audience, "I'm sick!" and tears down a screen.

A child in the audience cries periodically in the background, reminding me that this topic of mental health isn't spoken about frequently in our society, perhaps because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

She rolls around on the floor, wrapped in the screen before waving it above her head. Maybe she's surrendering. Up until now, I've witnessed her struggle and her fight. She is not alone. We cannot let her surrender without help.

Denson greets us one last time as *STATE : TRAIT* ends, dressed in a leotard and tutu edged in pill bottles that rattled when shook. She cries out to the audience, waiting with her hands to her ears for our replies. Her admissions have not fallen on a silent crowd. Several audience members reply. I'm left feeling emotionally invested in her work, her statement, and her investigation into self. Denson's statement could not be more true: we are responsible for each other.

Jamal Ari Black's piece, *768 – 160 x 2 = 2016 DEATHS*, spurred by recent events, covers the effect of police brutality on the lives of the African-American community. His stage is brightly lit. A kitchen table with two chairs sits in the downstage right corner. A pile of clothes sits just right of center stage. Five blue balloon people-shaped figures are strategically placed to balance the left side of the stage; a sixth stands behind the pile of clothes. If you've ever had a balloon artist twist together a hat for you at a carnival, you know exactly what they look like. The blue balloons are the blue lives of the police system. A drum set sits just off the downstage right corner.

Siri's voice rings out. "Here's what I found on the web for 'stop killing unarmed black people.'"

The piece begins with a couple sitting at the table: Black and dancer Stacey Yvonne Claytor. They move in slow gestures – seemingly the movements made when experiencing grief. He raises his arm as if to question 'why?' and she turns away from the audience into a seated fetal position of protection and disbelief. Then the sirens blare.

They're loud, and Black has taken shelter under the table. Claytor weaves in and around the blue figures. She's up against the bare back wall. Police radio correspondence fills the space as we watch her standing, her full body shaking. Beginning with undulation in her torso, it radiates out through her fingertips. Given the subject matter of the work, it wouldn't be a stretch of the imagination to assume she's portraying the reaction of a Taser or a gunshot ricocheting through the body.

She's afraid. She runs to the front row of the audience, almost as a plea for help. Then back to the wall, slinking along the bare surface in a panicked desperation as if she's trying to go unseen.

The couple returns to their chairs with flailing arms, shortly overturning both table and chairs in frustration.

Black starts rummaging through the pile of clothes, trading his own red shirt and khaki pants for a zip-up jacket, gym shorts and a baseball cap. Claytor trades her green dress for a red one. Individually, they dance in front of the blue balloons, their palms open, fingers splayed, running their hands across one forearm before switching to the other, as if displaying their right to bear arms. They are obviously unarmed.

They try on many different outfits, perhaps to play homage to the victims of police brutality. A white shirt, a baseball cap – no longer just items of clothing. They're now symbols of the victims.

He settles on a black hoodie, his hands up as he walks around the blue balloons – a scene we've seen play over and over on the evening news. One hand on his throat, the other straight up. He breaks the fourth wall, meandering into the audience.

Returning to the stage, Black strips of all excessive layers of clothing. Slowing walking the stage in black trunks, his hands are still raised.

Claytor slowly rights the kitchen table and the accompanying chairs. Sitting, she brings her head to her hands.

He falls backwards, slowly rolling to lay face down.

She stands on top of the table, one fist raised, circling slowly to the soft *tsk* of the snare. It takes everything in me not to join her.

She makes her way to where he lies. She rolls him up into her arms. My heart weeps as I think, *'How many families have lived this scene?'* It's silent.

All six blue balloon figures end up tied around his body before the piece is over. And just as quickly as they're tied, he begins to rip them off. In Dance Loft on 14's intimate theater space, the sounds of popping balloons echo. The piece is not a call for violence against police officers, but rather the opposite. It's a medium for initiating change to the police system and creating a discussion within our communities.

As the pieces of balloons sit scattered around Black, I can't help but think he's created a metaphor for our society. When unnecessary violence strikes down an innocent life, our communities are shattered. We're left with the remnants of fear but also the desperate need to make change.

Black's piece captures the humanity of social injustice. The accompanying drums, played by Marcus McGraw, portray anger that complements the frustration and pain depicted in the dancer's bodies and movement.

Both Denson and Black's works broke the fourth wall, stepping past the edge of the stage and engaging the audience in vocal and non-vocal ways. With two vitally important topics at hand, these moments are powerful. Denson's cry of, "I'm not normal!" solicited reassurances of, "Who is?" and "That's okay!" from audience members. Black's simple gesture of providing open, palms-up hands and a gentle squeeze to those he met in the audience spoke volumes. Though silent, it's as if he was saying, "I am human, too."

Dance provides the opportunity to say what cannot be spoken aloud. MissJessica Denson and Jamal Ari Black are developing their own artistic voices, and it is our responsibility to listen closely and ask, "How can we help?"