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by Rachael Appold

On March 4th and 5th, 2017, Dance Place audiences were gifted with a percussive masterpiece. Chicago-based dance company The Seldoms presented *Power Goes*, a work that provided a complete breakdown of power and its uses. The piece dealt specifically with former President Lyndon B. Johnson, sifting through his accomplishments and errors and connecting his presidency and persuasion skills with that of former President Barack Obama. To top it off, the company included students from Howard University's dance program in the work. The performance was massively successful, combining a unique choreographic formula with a topic so relevant, yet so unexplored.

Power Goes began with three dancers, Philip Elson and Amanda McAlister dressed in white, and Matthew McMunn dressed in black, facing each other on stage. Another dancer, Christina Gonzalez-Gillett, wearing all black, entered from stage left, strolling aggressively up to McAlister and towering over her until she was forced to lean back. After a few uncomfortable seconds of leaning, the four dancers began a session of aggressive chopping movements which almost resembled stage combat. Then, the two male dancers exited the stage, leaving the women to fight with each other. Gonzalez-Gillett strode menacingly behind her partner and, in an unexpected turn of events, spoke. "I love your hair," Gonzalez-Gillett exclaimed as she yanked the hair of her partner. "Thank you," said McAlister calmly as she was pulled to the floor by her ponytail. The dancers' movements had transitioned from exhibiting veiled aggression to blatant physical bullying. Yet their conversation remained calm, kind, and respectful.

Gonzalez-Gillett forced McAlister down to the floor and stepped on her ponytail, all while yelling, "Your hair looks fabulous!" in an intimidating tone. McAlister exhibited physical attempts to escape the abuse, but her words expressed the opposite; she thanked her abuser for her kind words and expressed shock that the woman who styled her hair done so for free. Eventually, McAlister escaped to a stage left wing while Gonzalez-Gillett strode downstage toward the audience. Reciting the same lines that she spit in the face of her partner, she violently pointed at different show-goers. Once she was finished reciting her lines, she repeated the same antagonistic movements while mouthing her words instead, allowing the audience to soak in her physical hostility.

The combination of abusive actions and kind words seemed to allude to Lyndon B. Johnson's forceful reputation. This former president was a large and assertive man known for bullying his opponents into agreement. He may not have threatened his detractors with physical violence, but he did use his large stature and actions to intimidate others.

The use of stage combat became a motif throughout the work. McAlister and Gonzalez-Gillett would return to their conversation about a haircut, this time adding ill-temperment to their words. While sitting in a horizontal row of white chairs across the stage, Gonzalez-Gillett pressured her partner to ask her hairstylist to cut her own hair. McAlister refused, lamenting about how rude it would be to ask and assuring her friend that getting a haircut "doesn't work that way." Still, Gonzalez-Gillett insisted that if her friend were "artful" and "subtle," the hairstylist would not mind.

The two women exited the stage while continuing to bicker, allowing the four remaining dancers to fight. It appeared at this moment that the remaining dancers' conversation mirrored that of McAlister and Gonzalez-Gillett. Philip Elson (presumably representing a store mogul during Johnson's term) executed a series of quick technical movements while insisting that he could not possibly allow black

people to work in his stores. His reasoning fell to the fact that he had “just signed a contract” which prevented him from integrating his workplace.

The other dancers responded by ganging up on Elson. They threw him to the floor, twisted his arms behind his back, and blocked his attempts to escape. They did so while calmly threatening to audit his businesses. Elson immediately changed his tune, attempting to escape the henchmen-like herd of dancers and claiming that he would consider integrating his stores. Eventually, he agreed to tear up his contract and accept black employees. Perhaps this section of the work exhibited the persuasion method of using direct threats, in opposition to the first section which displayed a more passive-aggressive argument.

One of the most powerful moments of the evening occurred when a group of Howard University students dressed in school uniforms (with chairs) entered the stage. The students sat in rows of white chairs which were (they had) arranged to face stage left. The members of The Seldoms sat in chairs arranged in a similar fashion. The movement at this point became physically calmer but more emotionally taxing. Their staging resembled that of a classroom, and Johnson’s actions of working toward integration immediately came to my mind.

After a few moments of gestural, organic movement, the dancers moved their chairs to form a semicircle around the stage. The student dancers’ movements turned wild and reckless as they grabbed hold of their own hair and challenged each other to menacing staredowns. In the center of the stage, The Seldoms executed a series of death-defying lifts. They threw each other around the space as the other dancers raged and a Jimmi Hendrix song echoed. Seeing such young dancers from one of the nation’s leading universities execute such emotional and historically-loaded work was a gift. This, combined with the choreographic structure, made for a truly powerful section. Another notable (and uncomfortable) section in the performance involved all six dancers performing stunts around the stage while putting their hands down their pants, scratching their underarms, and picking their noses. The dancers pushed limits even further by wiping their hands on each other’s shoulders. While this happened, an audio of Lyndon B. Johnson speaking to his tailor in a crude manner played. The audience could hear Johnson belch and speak about his bodily functions, while watching the dancers act out a series of grotesque actions.

Is it possible that Johnson believed there was power within blatantly crude actions? I got the chance to ask that question during the talkback after the performance. Artistic Director Carrie Hanson answered: “Well, Johnson was actually known for bringing his staff into the toilet with him as a means of just continuing his work day, but also maybe letting people know: ‘You don’t mean enough to me for me to close the door while I take a crap.’” Some might say that there is power in not caring about the reactions of others.

The work ended with a conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Barack Obama about wishfulness. The dancers arranged, rearranged, and stepped over chairs on the stage as they took turns playing both of the former presidents. Their movement was mostly pedestrian, give or take a few lifts. The conversation consisted of Johnson calling Obama’s campaign of change and hope “wishful.” Both characters lamented on their late arrivals to civil rights issues; Johnson felt that he waited too long to enforce integration, and Obama felt he waited too long to legalize marriage equality.

One of many inspiring statements to Obama made by the dancers who played Johnson was “Imagine: healthcare for all... there is a direct line from Theodore Roosevelt, to Franklin Roosevelt, to Lyndon B. Johnson, to you.” This sentiment was given after the dancers playing Obama wondered if the former president had done enough for his country. This moment helped put into context the large amount Obama accomplished in office. It also drew parallels between him and Johnson, who

had been considered just and good until he sent the first American troops to fight in the Vietnam War.

Power Goes is the recipient of a 2014 NEFA National Dance Project Award and the 2014 NPN Creation Fund Award. The work was set by Carrie Hanson in collaboration with all six of The Seldoms' members and Stuart Flack, the company's playwright. The Seldoms have explored and communicated through dance performance since 2003 when the company was founded. They currently tour across the country and teach master classes. The Seldoms have toured *Power Goes* since its creation in 2015, sharing this educational and unexpected work with the country.