One-on-one with Sherman Alexie

Now is the winter of Summer Fiction

+ the lowdown on music, theater, dance and more

2ND SEASON ARTS

JUMATATTU POE
HITS THE GROUND RUNNING
**Firm Footage**

Jumatatu Poe's audio/visual obsession keeps his dancers on their toes.

By Bruce Walsh

IN STOCKING FEET, Jumatatu Poe sits atstage with his BlackBerry laying just a few inches from his right hand. At least two rehearsals are rolling during this audience talkback for this late November preview of Flatland, at the Performance Garage in Fairmount, but Poe's phone is likely recording audio all the same. He likes to switch the recorder on at important moments—or any moment, for that matter.

A question about dialogue in the piece comes from the audience.

"Actually, I've been thinking about bringing a screenwriter into the process to help craft some of the language," he says, but then notices that the dancers sitting just behind him are trying to get his attention. He slaps himself on the head and groans: "Playwright! Of course! I meant playwright," he says, shaking his phone in frustration. "I guess I can't help but think digitally."

Five minutes later the audience is divided into small groups for further discussion. Dancers—still fresh from performance—prod them for thoughts on Flatland. A costume maker makes his way around the space, pointing the lens at people as they nervously attempt to interpret what they've just seen.

"This is modern dance," someone says, "I thought the whole point was that we're not supposed to get it." But these patrons have clearly never met Poe. He's a choreographer who desperately wants to be on the same wavelength as his audience. And he compulsively records as many of their reactions as he can—digitally.

At the corner of the stage, Shannon Murphy leads a group of audience members that includes former Urban Bush Women dancer Theresa Shockey and lead actress Sarah Sanford. Murphy is attempting to record the conversation with her phone. It isn't quite working. She interrupts Shockey twice to restart the device. When she interrupts a third time, Sanford gently places a hand on the young woman's waist, saying softly, "Let's just try to live in the moment for now."

POE STARTED DANCING AT Swarthmore College. Since then he's completed an M.F.A. in dance at Temple University, and has performed with just about every contemporary company in town, including Leah Stein, Kate Wallace-Wallace, Jane Bonner, Charles Anderson and Group Motion. At 28, Poe has certainly paid his dues. Along with Murphy and Sharon Norris, he directed disco/theater production Mondo, floor work to improvisational dialogue and new, cultural movements.

"There are just so many things happening at one time. There's constantly a new aesthetic rising to the surface, just as another is falling into the back ground," says local choreographer Makoto Hirano, who was part of a feedback panel that advised Poe during Flatland's early stages. "It's clearly an ensemble piece, being led by [Poe], and that's what links these vignettes together for me. I see his voice throughout."

"I think specialization in one technique is less important for dancers now. I like to try to figure out what it takes to do everything," says Poe. "And, yeah, there's something really arrogant about that. All of these styles require rigorous attention to detail. But that's what I'm after that shift from one to the next—a total gravity shift."

That means a lot of homework for Flatland's 11 performers. Recordings of almost every rehearsal are uploaded onto dropbox, where dancers can meticulously review their own movements.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," says dancer Gabrielle Revelle.

"The first thing we did was the opening sequence, which was pretty abstract. It was absolutely pure dance. Everything had to do with these complex counts. No one else was on my same count, so I used the video a lot to get my specific thing down."

Poe is constantly incorporating video into every aspect of the process. He often videotapes himself, giving notes. He
The War Within

EVEN OVER THE phone, you can tell Sherman Alexie laughs with his whole body. The author, who chatted with City Paper from his office in Seattle, has a jovial nature that belies the wistful, occasionally heart-rending nature of his writing. A Spokanes/Coeur d’Alene Indian (his preferred terminology) who grew up on a reservation in Washington state, Alexie has been chosen as the focus of 2011’s One Book, One Philadelphia project, a citywide book club aimed at building community through reading. The Free Library has selected both War Dances, an exquisite collection of poetry and short stories, and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, a young adult novel and winner of a 2007 National Book Award.

CITY PAPER: In an appearance on the Colbert Report, you explained that you don’t allow your books to be available digitally because it hurts local book communities. This project is trying to foster one. How did you get involved with One Book, One Philadelphia?

SHERMAN ALEXIE: They approached me. I’ve done it in a few cities, but Philadelphia is by far the largest. And the thing that excited me — and that I think is ironic and fun — is that the city where the US was founded is all reading a book by an Indian. It’s a hilarious take on colonialism and the Liberty Bell — both cracked.

CP: Your work deals a lot with storytelling, and storytelling. In War Dances, the protagonists tend to be musicians, filmmakers and writers.

SA: It never even occurred to me that they were all storytellers, in one form or another. That way. As you were asking the question, I thought maybe it was some sort of nostalgia, in this digital age. I think maybe I was subconsciously calling back old ways of telling stories amid all this rapid change. The last two years, I’ve just been very much about the way things used to be. . . . War Dances is really structured like my very first book, The Business of Ranch dressing, so I guess you could say it was an exercise in pitiful nostalgia.

CP: By constantly reinforcing the idea of storytelling as an act, you call attention to the fact that it’s not objective. In this collection, the idea arises again and again that something can be factually false but emotionally true.

SA: I’m a literary writer, but I’m also an entertainer. Much in the same way you look at a TV or watch a stage performance, as a writer you can drop in and out of awareness of the frame. Just now — when I missed our phone call — I was utterly unaware that I was anything but a poet. I was in the world of the poem. Alexie was late for our interview because he was writing a poem on the death of those birds in Arkansas.

CP: [There are a lot of repeated, bedrock stories and ideas in your writing. Are some of those repeated narrative structures autobiographical?] Is that why you keep coming back to them?

SA: I wrote a line in a poem this morning that read, “Why does that chuck barrel keep coming back to me?” I never feel like I’ve gotten over it — that I’ve written the thing I need to write about it, or that I’ve arrived at a place where I fully understand the thing. So, you can think of my repetitions as me constantly interrogating my memory.

CP: War Dances is so dynamic in terms of the narrative structure — there’s poetry, short stories, odd, short prose thoughts and even lists. SA: Well, it’s funny — True Diary . . . was so dang successful. It just dropped off The New York Times list after being there for three years. And part of me, certainly, while I enjoy the mainstream success, misses it. I think I wrote War Dances, and constructed it, with the idea of pushing back. I was writing a book that was not only called back to my first books, but called back to what I really am: a small- press alternative writer who got lucky. And, once again, it’s also nostalgia. When we were working on it, the editor and I, we thought of it as a mix tape. There’s even an “Odd to Mix Tapes” poem in there. So, the whole idea was to create a variety of selections that told an overall story.

CP: This book is also really funny. I read it in a plane and disturbed the person next to me. I think your writing continues to get funnier.

SA: Part of it is probably because I’ve really turned my public appearance into theater in a sense — monologues. I really do focus on the comedic aspects during my talks. I think it’s just a tool I’ve been honing on stage for years that’s found its way into the fiction more and more.

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“HEARING A CONFESSION camera over there? I mean, what am I supposed to do?”

HIRANO IS THE only person at the 700 Club without a drink. He looks a bit out of place among the newly-happy hour crowd, as he discusses PlainsIndian with a detached tone, something like an HVAC repairman inspecting duct work. But then the twenty-something choreographer looks back against the wall. He lumbers up his mount, tugs at his tie as he thinks, tosses wonders aside. “Right now [Bel] is collecting all this data — like tons of it. And I’m not sure what he’s doing with it. I feel like he’s hearding it — like he’s got this basement full of data, and sometimes I wonder, what is it that he wants to learn from all of it?”

Pivotal is the show, a fusion of opera and dance, with three PlainsIndian dancers in a freezing-cold converted warehouse. The dancers work through a two-minute segment repeatedly, as the shifts the camera around the room to capture different perspectives. Eventually he packs the camera and tripod into a duffel bag, and struts a book bag containing yet another digital video camera onto his back. “Sure I know. It’s a big paradox,” he says between sips of coffee at a nearby café. “I know I’m reflected in PlainsIndian — the way I’m consumed by media, I know that. But I don’t see it as I’m saying, ‘This is what’s wrong with the world. I see it all like, ‘These are the things that happen in our lives.”

But why record such a huge audience? At the workshop performances, every audience member had to sign a waiver allowing Pivotal and company to tape them. “I want my work to inspire conversation, so I want to let what those conversations are,” he explains. “But now we’re recording the audience to make sure they understand what we’re saying. I just want to see everything that’s there — the stuff that lives in our bodies and our movements. I want to know that from fresh eyes, and I want to hear about it from as many perspectives as possible.”

“I think making art works on thera- peutics,” says Bellock. “It’s a way to keep yourself in check with issues you may be struggling with.”

Then he pushes forward and added, “I’ve always said the problem is, it’s another thing to be able to fix.”

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* PlainsIndian, Sat., Jan. 21, 8 p.m., 816, Arenberg Centre for the Performing Arts, 3400 Walnut St., 215-896-6000, arenbergcenter.org.