

INTERVIEW with dancer Shelton Lindsay for Unseen Online

Shelton Lindsay is perched at his desk in Bushwick, long legs arched in white leggings and blue eyeliner blurred from a day of dancing. His bedroom is brimful of fabrics and jewels - a fairy bower backstage at the circus, adorned in spectacular ropes and ethereal golden branches. "I have a lot of fun bringing boys back here," he says with a warm, mischievous grin. Over miso soup and chocolate ganache, we talk movement, mirrors, social media, glitter, and being seen.

When I met Shelton in a writer's group in 2014, I was captivated by his contagious sense of wonder. I knew him as a fantastic writer, but I never saw him move. It surprised me when he began posting photos and videos of dance on social media, beginning with swift clips of movement that escalated into a louder and louder online presence. It's unusual to witness someone journey into dance, or any performance, with such instant magnetism and such grace.

Social media has been an essential tool for Shelton professionally and creatively, both as a platform to expand his audience and a lens with which to track and analyze his body of work. "I've never looked at myself through the paradigm of someone who's capable of producing anything, I've always been a critic. The first time I shot a dance video and uploaded it online, it became an announcement of an intention that I set and I was sort of shocked when I began to get positive response. Thanks to social media you can share these little art-artifacts and suddenly you've begun to become an artist without meaning to."

The momentum Shelton gained through social media led to him dance professionally, and he now performs frequently at venues like The House of Yes, and as Co-Artistic Director of New York Neo Futurists, a performance art collective focused on creating dynamic, unrepeatable performances in "a fusion of sport, poetry, and a living newspaper."

Shelton has been clearing away the furniture and finding space to dance since the beginning; in his parents living room, at bars and parties and empty dance halls. At university in rural Scotland, Shelton partnered with his shadow cast against cliffs and sand along the beach. "If you catch a shadow at the right angle, it teaches you about a different form of movement," he explains, "And you can be self critical, you can say, hey shadow, you're not right! Your shadow-body becomes this interesting other you are speaking with, both you and utterly alien."

Shelton later moved to London, where his friends offered him his first professional dance gig at a festival in Glastonbury. They needed someone to emerge from a paper maché volcano on a boat called the HMS Sweet Charity and blow red glitter all over the audience. "They were like, 'We need a dancer who has nothing to do for a week and you're the only person we can think of.' and I was like, 'I've never done that!' and they were like, 'Well, you're free! And we have fun dancing with you to Imogen Heap, so come.'"

Shelton inhaled so much glitter during the performance, that three days later he was still coughing up red. "It felt like gay consumption. I remember thinking, Oh my God, finally! This is the person I always wanted to be - the person coughing up red glitter."

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You mentioned you came to mirrors late in life, and have not always been comfortable watching yourself move. How has sharing movement on social media affected the lens you see yourself through as a dancer and how you relate to your body critically?

Visibility is key and media is a tool, let's use it intelligently. I came to understand my body through social media. By seeing myself reflected back in it, captured by it. Growing up I never owned a personal mirror, my school had a dress code, and I felt awkward in my body, unhappy with it, or overweight, so I rarely looked at it. Social media has forced me to begin looking at myself, and as someone who has a particular aesthetic style, Facebook really taught me to try and turn myself into the art or person I'd want to see.

I want you to like photos of my body and my movement. And I want to own that the road to feeling sexy definitely started when I gained the confidence to put myself and my body up on the internet and wait for people to like it. I wasn't totally comfortable and at times it hurt. I'd post something and get 12 likes and the next person would be all abs and have 6,000 likes and it inevitably brings up feelings about not being validated. But you just have to keep being you. I'd be like, '12 likes for me? Fuck yeah! I'm on Fire Island dancing like a crab with two nude sunbathers! We're all just here being ourselves.'

So I kept posting on social media and I looked at what people liked. I began losing weight, working out, I started dressing better, I got more likes, my sex life improved. But I was turning myself into a product without substance.

Social media is not an accurate reflection of self, and I was trying to use it as a tool to see myself with. Social media has been immensely helpful for me and my development as an artist, but it's a shifting sands territory that's best interrogated, rather than the foundation of your own artistic identity, which I fear for a while mine was becoming.

So then I went and bought a mirror, because I realized I needed to actually know something about myself, and I'm a witch and the ritual of looking seemed important. I sat there in front of this mirror and I stared at myself. I learned how to look at myself, and be both critical and supportive. To love my imperfections, to be honest with myself. To get better as a dancer and a performer, I had to get better as a person and interrogate what makes me uncomfortable. I have to continue learning to see myself, and more than that be honest about what I see. But since starting that work, it has become progressively easier.

I'm interested in how we digest live performance differently now that we can record almost anything in the moment. How do you think we socialize differently at places like The House of Yes, places that merge performance and a party experience, with one foot in a currency of likes?

There's the innate second self that exists when I'm performing in a space like the House of Yes and it is the lens of the social media. You're never outside of it in the House of Yes. If you're dancing in a costume someone will take their phone out, and begin recording you, and then someone else. There are these moments when you're on stage and you feel like you look beautiful and you look over and there's about seven phones pointed at you and you're like, 'the entirety of my body is being captured simultaneously.' If I could find this footage I could put it together and have a seven point of view camera shot of a spontaneous interpretive dance moment. Personally I'd love that. But at the same time the moment is corrupted.

Your art has also just become their validation. Your body goes onto their stream and it's like, 'Oh, this is payment, you're getting liked for me.' You're looking at me and you're objectifying me. But that is because I have intentionally become other to you. I'm wearing a bunch of flowers, I poured a bunch of makeup on myself, you don't know if I'm a boy or a girl. I know I'm an oddity for you, but that's ok.

And that's when movement becomes this intentional power play, and I'm really relishing discovering where that lives sexually, as well in movement. The House of Yes totally encourages that - you slink out onto stage and you don't just want everyone to look at you, you want everyone to want to fuck you. And sometimes more than that you want people to have weird sexual fantasies. My body always wants to hook into is the vibe of the sensuous at The House of Yes. It's the energy that comes out of the crowd there and I want to tap into it because it's the counterpoint to the digital. It's immediate, and sweaty, real and raw, and all mediated through this sense of the magical. It's so freeing to be alive and to feel like there's a space in the world where I can do that. There's nowhere quite like the House of Yes.

How has your lifestyle changed since you began dancing professionally?

I'm much happier. Dancing changed my life because it gave me an outlet for sorrow. Because you're never sorrowful when you're moving. You can't be. Life-hack: your body is a fucking machine, so trick it's system. Moving brings you joy: FACT. Walking makes you happy, so walk places. Now walk places while drinking fruit smoothies surrounded by people smiling while hugging you, raising your arms above your head. You won't be sad.

You just have to do it. Dance is let's all just do it, so now we're gonna do it. Put on whatever you wanna be - for you that could be running pants, I don't fucking care, but as long as it's exactly what you want to be wearing at that exact moment - that's the right path. And then start moving, then find the song.

What are your favorite spaces to take up?

I'm tall, white, cis...ish - I mean, I read as a man! So taking up space in the world is not my problem. Culture wants to give that to me, and that is complicated in and of itself, but I can take it - and I choose to often. Especially around where I choose to dance now. I like to dance in dance halls and bars and clubs, but my favorite spaces to dance are on beaches, boardwalks,

streets, parks, in the bows of a tree, waiting on the subway platform. And as someone that people already give space to, I feel really free now to take up that space. Now that I've developed into a performer and now that I feel physically attractive enough that people want to look at me anyway, or fashionable enough that people are interested, I have the benefit of also feeling empowered to perform, because if people stumbled across this I wouldn't even be embarrassed, I'd feel more composed.

How do you dance in performance?

By trying to be seen the way you want to be seen by casual eyes, by lovers. Because then you feel free, you feel like you - you stop judging if you're doing it right. It's never wrong if it's trying for something. I can't do ballet because I don't know it, but I know what I feel like when I do ballet - or what I want to look like - and I just do that. And whatever it is, it's good enough. Because it's an attempt.

You recently became Co-Artistic Director of New York Neo Futurists. Tell me a little more about the work you do with them.

The New York Neo Futurists are an experimental performance art collective here in the city. We do a show weekly called Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind, and it's our ever-changing attempt at performing 30 plays in 60 minutes. We perform all manner of plays from experimental monologues to shadow puppetry to dance to abstract political satire to slam poetry - you name it we'll do it.

Thirty of them in sixty minutes?

Sometimes! Sometimes we make it to thirty. Sometimes we fuck ourselves over! You know, we'll do one play where the stage suddenly has to become covered in water because it's integral to the play, and then the rest of the night you're sliding around trying to do a monologue about your deep-felt emotional connection to your mother but you're covered in someone else's chocolate and it just veers into the absurd.

Where else can we see you regularly?

There's a queer party once a month at the House of Yes called Polari, and I am part of the resident performers, The Faguettes. There are great queens, wonderful shows, fabulous costumes, so many exclamation points, and it's great for dancing. It's once a month, always on a Wednesday, and it's only \$5. So come, have few drinks, dance, make out with someone.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.

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