

THE CONVERSATION

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Hip-hop dance vs Donald Trump: how robot moves just got political

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Strait-talkin' BBE

Suddenly the dancers' bodies freeze, caught in a white rectangle of light. Reduced to a state of shivering, their faces contort until what emerges is a scream. But this is a scream we do not actually hear. We only see it in the dancers' gaping mouths against a looping sound of white noise – and then: utter silence.

This is ten minutes into *Blak Whyte Gray*, the hip-hop dance production by east London collective **Boy Blue Entertainment** showing at the **Edinburgh International Festival**. It is the closing moment of "Whyte", the first part of the production, featuring three dancers in oversize straitjackets (see main image). They have been doing a robot-like dance, old-skool hip-hop style, limbs moving mechanically as if controlled by an outside force.

The screams feel like a reference to oppression, incarceration and the lack of safe spaces for minorities in the past and present. Think colonialism, slavery, segregation, Trump and Black Lives Matter – a powerful message in uncertain times, particularly in the wake of the recent violent scenes in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Author



Michael Bachmann

Lecturer in Theatre Studies, University of Glasgow



Trump speaking after Charlottesville.

Michael “Mikey J” Asante, the show’s composer and artistic co-director along with choreographer Kenrick “H₂O” Sandy, later tells me that the imagery goes beyond questions of race or ethnicity, and is not a direct response to his experiences as a black man in the UK. “In our present political climate, with Trump and Brexit, there’s lots of people who can agree with the idea of their voice not being heard,” he says.

That can be interpreted in different ways, of course – not finding a voice, being denied a voice, not being listened to. But then political dance and theatre can often be powerful without making a clear-cut statement. As Asante puts it, politics is always a matter of perception.

While that opening segment was all about restriction set to an electronic accompaniment, the show takes us on a journey towards what Asante calls more “organic” movements and music. It culminates in a joyous celebration with eight dancers falling in and out of formation as if finally gaining control over their own lives and bodies.

Ghanaian masks tower over the dancers’ heads. The masks are another visually striking image, which Asante explains are used in traditional ceremonies in Ghana as vessels for ancestors. Thus it is not only repressed people in the present that are part of this movement for liberation and survival, but those from the past, too.

Spectator power

At other times, Blak Whyte Gray’s imagery remains intentionally abstract and cryptic. This is intended as a way of giving power to the spectators. “It is your experience in life that will determine how you see the political value in what you are watching,” says Asante.

In one sense, the silent scream embodies this idea: through its lack of a narrative voice, it guides spectators but does not seek to determine the outcome of their journey. It made me think of Shobana

Jeyasingh's *Material Men* redux, another excellent recent dance production that uses hip-hop and references colonial history. *Material Men* is a two-man show in which the political emerges out of the coming together of two different dance styles, classical Indian from one dancer and hip-hop from the other.



'Mikey J' Asante. BBE

Through the use of voice over narration and film at specific moments during the performance, *Material Men* takes great care to explicitly embed its dance moves within a larger history of indentured labour, forced migration and being part of the Indian diaspora.

This is no more or less powerful than Blak Whyte Gray's sometimes more abstract approach, and we're not talking about absolutes in any case: *Material Men*'s message doesn't completely determine spectators' interpretations of the show, and Blak Whyte Gray still guides its audience by what they see.

What the two productions show is the range of possibilities for making contemporary dance political. *Material Men* won **high critical praise** for its endeavours, while Blak Whyte Gray, which originally debuted in January at the Barbican in London, was **nominated** for an Olivier award.

Just like theatre – and maybe more so because of the focus on physical movement – dance doesn't even need a message to be political. It is there in the history of the bodily movements, with hip-hop, for example, being a cultural expression that combines Caribbean, African, South American and other traditions.

It is there because of the political climate of our times: while the American president defends far-right protesters, shows have been cancelled at the Edinburgh Fringe because Syrian artists have been denied visas. And it is there because theatre, performance and dance make artists and spectators share time together, thus bearing the promise of a community. Blak, whyte or gray, it becomes impossible to ignore what is happening in front of you.

Blak Whyte Gray by Boy Blue Entertainment is at the Edinburgh International Festival on August 16-19.

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