

PHOTO BY JULIETA CERVANTES



**CYNTHIA OLIVER/COC6 DANCE THEATRE:
VIRAGO-MAN DEM**

Thursday, November 15, 2018, at 7:30pm
Colwell Playhouse

PROGRAM

CYNTHIA OLIVER/COCO DANCE THEATRE: VIRAGO-MAN DEM

Conceived and directed by Cynthia Oliver

Choreographed by Cynthia Oliver with sections in collaboration with the dancers

Texts, directed by Oliver, are improvisational narratives grounded in the lived experience of the dancers

PERFORMERS

Duane Cyrus

Jonathon Gonzalez

Niall Jones

Ni'Ja Whitson

MUSICIANS

Jason Finkelman, percussion and laptop
electronics

Elias Finkelman, trombone

Geoff Gersh, guitar

Gordon Kay, drums

Brandon T. Washington, vocals

John Wiczorek, additional percussion

COLLABORATORS

Jason Finkelman, composer

John Boesche, video design

Black Kirby—John Jennings and Stacey Robinson,
visual art

Susan Becker, costume design

Amanda K. Ringger, lighting design

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT

Valerie Oliveira, stage manager

Meckha Cherry, wardrobe coordinator

Cornelio Casaclang, company manager

The recording “If I Betray” by Midnite is used with permission from I-Grade Records, St. Croix USVI.

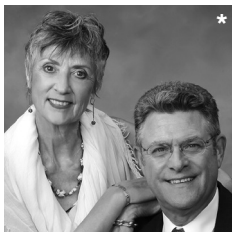
This evening’s performance is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my mother Mary Howell-Oliver, an artist whose creative ambitions, like so many black Americans, were thwarted by racial bias in her lifetime. She persisted by living royally, raucously, and generously offering her art to her family and friends. She nourished my curiosity and talent and encouraged me to pursue my dream. This work is the evidence of my dreams and what I hope for all of us. —Cynthia Oliver

Virago-Man Dem was supported in part by research and development residencies at New Waves Institute in collaboration with Dancing While Black in Trinidad W.I.; the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography at Florida State University; Vermont Performance Lab with major support from the National Endowment for the Arts; Gina Gibney Dance; the Abrons Arts Center; and with commissioning funds from The MAP Fund, a program of Creative Capital supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; The National Performance Network’s Creation Fund; The New England Foundation for the Arts, National Dance Project Fund—made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and the Edwards Arts Fund.

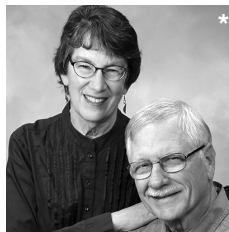
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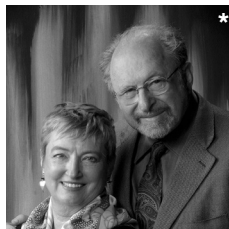
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PROGRAM NOTES

Like all of my works, this project has been long in the making. It was borne out of long, loving, and complicated relationships with black men in the multiple worlds in which I live. It was jettisoned into importance with the birth of my son and my observations of what he and other young men of color have to navigate as they make their way in the world. It was then stretched to include masculinities performed by those of us not born male, but for whom male identity might feel more right with our being or for whom the breadth of possibilities of our gender performance includes what we might sometimes presume male. It was borne out of a desire to offer to the world another view of black masculinity that is more nuanced and flexible and stylish and funny and tender and rich than those we are persistently burdened with in the contemporary American landscape. So this work for me is an act of love. I am interested in choreographing both that which folks are wont to navigate in their daily lives and that which we might have to already be in the process of exceeding, transiting, and aspiring for something we do not yet know. And one doesn't have to necessarily be a biological man to do or want or be so. With these ideas circulating, I offer this showing as a presentation of ideas, those which have been consistent with the work since its beginning and those with which I am/we are wrestling anew. I welcome your eyes on this iteration.

This work has benefitted from the generosity of thought, ideas, place, cash, and emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual support from many, many directions. I thank first and foremost my brilliant collaborators who have brought their best to this work, who have asked me the hard questions, who have offered elements I could

not have dreamed, and brought this work into beautiful fruition. The performers who give EVERYTHING! They are phenomenal and I could not do this work without them. I bow at their feet. They have given their best, challenged, and stretched me so that I too have to bring my best, and we birth this together. To Makeda Thomas and New Waves Institute, the first to recognize and offer me a place and beautiful people with whom I could experiment and consider what I wanted to do; to sister Paloma McGregor who partnered with New Waves in support. While in Trinidad, there were the folks whose generosity fueled my confidence and fed me with great questions and commentary—Robert Young, Mark Eastman, Ricarrdo Valentine, Orlando Hunter, Michael Mortley. My host and dear friend Benny Gomes and his friend who soon became mine, Carol La Chapelle. My informal casting director(!), Nibia Pastrana Santiago from Puerto Rico—a little further north in the archipelago; the folks without whom I would not have been able to process this work in the rich and full ways we have been afforded over the past three years, Vermont Performance Lab (Sara Coffey! Katherine and Dave), and the artists and activists we encountered there—Curtiss Reid and Donald Mutebi; Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (Carla Peterson, Ansje Burdick, Chris Cameron, Afua, Mary, and team); the wonderful scholars, artists, and community activists I encountered at Florida State University as a Mellon Fellow, including of course the hospitality of my dear friend Darrell Jones and new friend Summer Hill Seven. In Illinois, I had the support of Krannert Center for the Performing Arts and Terri Ciofalo, Level 21—our production arm—and Sam Smith,

my brother in all things community; Dance at Illinois and my colleagues and department head Jan Erkert; longtime support and friend Craig Peterson for proposing that I do this project in the first place and his ongoing support since the 1990s; Gina Gibney and Gibney Dance for space and time, American Realness for our process presentation opportunity at the 2017 Association of Performing Arts Professionals conference; National Performance Network Creation Fund; the Doris Duke Multi Arts Production (MAP) Fund; and the Edwards Arts Fund. And I would be remiss if I didn't thank Caryn Hodge, my childhood friend from St. Croix, who first brought up the term virago in a conversation we were having on the island and gave me the spark that led to the title of the piece. I count on my longtime friendships and family to help me retain the memories that float through my work and inspire its naming, its undercurrents, and its backbone.

—Cynthia Oliver

PROFILES

CYNTHIA OLIVER (choreographer) is a Bronx-born, Virgin Island-reared dance maker. Significantly influenced by the black avant garde, Oliver creates performance collages that move from dance to word to sound and back again toward an eclectic and provocative dance theatre, through which she incorporates textures of Caribbean performance with African and American aesthetic sensibilities. She has toured the globe as a featured dancer with contemporary companies David Gordon Pick Up Co., Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, Bebe Miller Company, and Tere O'Connor Dance and as an actor in works by Laurie Carlos, Greg Tate, Lone, Ntozake Shange, and Deke Weaver. She is a New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Award-winning choreographer and a Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography Mellon Fellow (2016). She holds a PhD in performance studies, is a professor in the dance department, and an affiliate in African-American Studies and Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is a University Scholar (2011), a Center for Advanced Studies Associate (2016), and was recently appointed Associate Vice Chancellor for Research in the Humanities, Arts, and Related Fields (2017) at the University of Illinois.

SUSAN BECKER (costume design) works as a designer, artist, and educator in the field of fashion and costume. For the past 20 years she has designed for traditional and experimental settings, from the fashion industry to collaborations on stage, film, and site-specific

projects. Recent collaborators include artists Deke Weaver and Jennifer Allen (*Elephant*, *WOLF*, and *BEAR*), choreographers Tere O'Connor (*Sister*), Sara Hook (*Bored Houseguests*), Cynthia Oliver (*BOOM!* and *Virago-Man Dem*), and Jennifer Monson (*Live Dancing Archive*, *In Tow*). Becker has also taught extensively, including for the Rhode Island School of Design and as a lecturer at the University of Illinois.

JOHN BOESCHE (video design) has created projected images for more than 180 dance, opera, theatre, and music productions and is excited to be working with Cynthia Oliver/COCO Dance Theatre. Designs for dance include Hedwig Dances, The Joffrey Ballet, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Lucky Plush Productions, Mordine & Company, and Erica Mott Productions, among others. His scenic and media designs for regional theatre include Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Geffen Playhouse (LA), Goodman Theatre, Lookingglass Theatre, McCarter Theatre Center (Princeton), New York Shakespeare Festival (NYC), Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Steppenwolf Theatre, among others. Boesche has received the Merritt Award for Excellence in Design and Collaboration, three Joseph Jefferson Awards for his theatre designs, a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, a Metro DC Dance Award, and a 2018 Bessie nomination, with John Jennings and Stacey Robinson, for Outstanding Visual Design. He is the chair of Digital Media for Live Performance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

CORNELIO D. CASACLANG (company manager) returns to the University of Illinois and Krannert Center where he was a volunteer and member of the Krannert Center Student Association and worked at Krannert Center for several years, including as event director. He has worked as a production and company manager and has collaborated with Cynthia and COCo Dance Theatre since 2008. When not working on the logistics for *Virago-Man Dem*, Casaclang does logistics analysis for a Swedish home furnishings company. He hails from Chicago via Baguio.

MECKHA CHERRY (wardrobe coordinator) is originally from Jacksonville, Florida, and grew up in the Bronx. Her initial introduction to sewing was by her mother. She first discovered her love of costume design while working with Kevin Iega Jeff of Deeply Rooted Dance Theater. Cherry has worked with Ronald K. Brown, Cynthia Oliver, PHILADANCO Dance Company, Camille A Brown, Alvin Ailey II American Dance Theater, and Urban Bush Women. Cherry has designed for New York City dance schools including Mind Builders, Harlem School of the Arts, Professional Center for the Arts, L. De. Dance School, and Abundance Academy of Dance. A dedicated teacher, Cherry also teaches sewing and theatre to children in urban communities.

DUANE CYRUS (performer) is a performing/creative artist whose work focuses on the confluence of questions created by positioning moving bodies in conceptual environments. His work is informed by research of Black American and Caribbean culture. Cyrus has worked in a range of genres from contemporary dance to visual art. Cyrus' kaleidoscopic works are accessible, relevant, and fluidly negotiate physical capabilities and possibilities for moving bodies. His work challenges the monolithic paradigm between the voyeuristic and passively invisible observer and the inscrutably remote performer with visually stimulating scenes that transform and shift the viewer's perception of the observed. Cyrus is a professor of dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and director of Theatre of Movement, a performing and visual art collective that intersects Cyrus' movement expertise with photographers, filmmakers, poets, and musicians. With Theatre of Movement, Cyrus seeks to disrupt and re-envision how artists develop, produce, and present their work.

JASON FINKELMAN (composer/performer) has a variety of artistic concerns that focus on improvised music, cross-cultural collaborative projects, and composition for dance, theatre, and film. A Philadelphia-born percussionist, Finkelman performs on African and Brazilian instruments handcrafted by Adimu Kuumba, specializing on the berimbau. He employs laptop electronics to manipulate original samples of his acoustic instruments, creating a personalized ambient, Avant world sound. His extensive work spanning over 20 years with choreographer Cynthia Oliver includes *BOOM!* (2014-15) and the Bessie Award-winning performances *SHEMAD* (2000) and *Death's Door* (1996). Finkelman directs Global Arts Performance Initiatives, an engagement program of Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois.

JONATHAN GONZALEZ (performer) is a choreographer and Bessie-nominated performer based in his native New York City. He is a New York Live Arts Fresh Tracks Artist with EmmaGrace Skove-Epes, BAX/Dancing While Black Fellow under the direction of Paloma McGregor, Diebold Award recipient for Distinction in Choreography and Performance, Rema Hort Mann Foundation nominee, as well as a POSSE Leadership and Bessie Schonberg Scholar. Currently he is a BAX/SUBMERGE! artist under the curation of Ali Rosa-Salas' season *Break Time*. Gonzalez has performed in the works of Ligia Lewis, Alex Baczyinski-Jenkins, Isabel Lewis, Phillip Howe, Ni'Ja Whitson, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, and Grisha Coleman. He is a graduate of Trinity College, Trinity Laban Conservatoire, and Sarah Lawrence College (MFA).

JOHN JENNINGS (visual art) is a professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California-Riverside. His work centers around intersectional narratives regarding identity politics and popular media. Jennings is co-editor of *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* and co-founder/organizer of The Schomburg Center's Black Comic Book Festival. He is co-founder of the MLK NorCal's Black Comix Arts Festival and also SOL-CON: The Brown and Black Comix Expo. Jennings is a 2016 Nasir Jones Hiphop Studies Fellow at Harvard University. His current projects include the hiphop adventure *Kid Code: Channel Zero*, the supernatural crime noir *Blue Hand Mojo*, and the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*.

NIALL JONES (performer) is a dance artist working and living in New York City. Jones uses light, sound, video, text, costume, and other temporal elements to construct situations that engage and explore the conditions of site, presence, arrangement, and disorientation in performance. Jones received a 2017 Bessie Award nomination for Outstanding Emerging Choreographer. A graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (MFA in dance in 2014), Jones also works at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia as assistant director and creative producer for the School of Dance.

VALERIE OLIVEIRO (stage manager) is an artist based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is originally from Singapore. This year, she is stage managing for Cynthia Oliver, Bebe Miller, and Dance Heginbotham. She recently designed lighting for Rosy Simas [*Skin(s)*] at Intermedia Arts (Minneapolis) and at La Peña (Berkeley, California). Oliveiro also recently performed in the work of Jennifer Monson (*In Tow*), Morgan Thorson (*Still Life*), and will perform in a new work by Morgan Thorson and Rosy Simas in 2018.

AMANDA K. RINGGER (lighting design) is based in New York City and has been designing locally, nationally, and internationally for over 20 years with artists such as Faye Driscoll, Doug Elkins, Cynthia Oliver, Darrah Carr, Jennifer Archibald, Alexandra Beller, Deborah Lohse, Donnell Oakley, LMnO3, Molly Poerstel, Kota Yamazaki, Sean Donovan and Sebastián Calderón Bentin, Laura Peterson, Julian Barnett, and cakeface, among many others. She received a BA from Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, and an MFA from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. She is the recipient of a 2009 Bessie Award for her collaboration on Faye Driscoll's *837 Venice Boulevard* at HERE Arts Center in New York City.

STACEY ROBINSON (visual art) is an assistant professor of graphic design at the University of Illinois, as well as an Arthur A. Schomburg Fellow who completed his Master of Fine Arts degree at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His work discusses ideas of "Black Utopias" as decolonized spaces of peace by considering Black affluent, self-sustaining communities, Black protest movements, and the art that document(ed) them. As part of the collaborative team Black Kirby with artist John Jennings, he creates graphic novels, gallery exhibitions, and lectures that deconstruct the work of artist Jack Kirby to re-imagine Black resistance spaces inspired by Black diasporic cultures. His latest graphic novel *I Am Alfonso Jones* with writer Tony Medina is available from Lee & Low Books.

NI'JA WHITSON (performer) is a gender-nonconforming interdisciplinary artist, Bessie-awarded performer (skeleton architecture), and writer. Whitson has been referred to as "majestic" and "magnetic" by *The New York Times* and is recognized by *Brooklyn Magazine* as a culture influencer. Other recent awards include a 2018 MAP Fund Award, Camargo Fellowship, Dance in Process (DiP) Residency, Hedgebrook Fellowship, LMCC Process Space Residency, Bogliasco Fellowship, Brooklyn Arts Exchange Artist Residency, two-time Creative Capital "On Our Radar" award including being in its inaugural group, among dozens of other residencies and awards across disciplines. Whitson is an assistant professor of experimental choreography at the University of California, Riverside.