

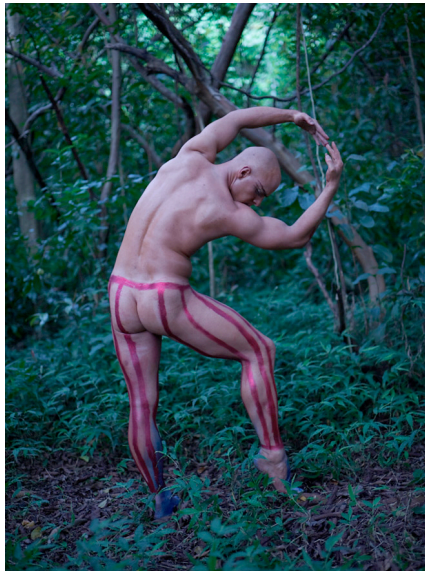
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## EAST VILLAGE BOYS\*

### Transcending Form: John Byrne and David LaChapelle

By Sean Kennedy



Portrait of John Byrne photographed for EVB by David LaChapelle.

His shows at Lever House and Michelman Fine Art have drawn the attention, but David LaChapelle is also represented this summer by the evening-length dance *Transcending Form*, which he produced for his friend and frequent collaborator, choreographer John Byrne. Despite its title, the work marks a return to form for both men: for LaChapelle, a return to dance six years after his indelible krumping documentary *Rize*; for Byrne, a Juilliard-trained dancer, a return to balletic movement after a long stint choreographing pop-cultural extravaganzas - music videos, Elton John's Vegas show - for LaChapelle and others. The pair talked about *Transcending Form*, a meditation on rebirth that's often more coy than serious, at Café Orlin - the site of the two's first date after being introduced by (natch) Amanda Lepore.

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Sean Kennedy: How did you guys first start to work together?

David LaChapelle: I just thought John was a great dancer and I needed help with some choreography. I was directing The Red Piano for Elton John; there were a lot of dance-driven pieces to his older classic songs that I did videos for for Caesar's Palace. We were given pretty much free reign and a lot of those pieces are just dance: John on the screen doing these amazing vignettes. Super strong. I wanted to see what he could do when we did Lever House together.

Sean: Thematically that show and Transcending Form seem linked.

John Byrne: This project was originally supposed to be part of Lever House. There are three components, and the dance [Transcending Form] was supposed to be another element of the show. It was going to be actual live dancing - my cast was going to be there. But logistically we couldn't do it for different reasons. So David and I decided to still pursue—

David: It was kind of last minute that they cut it off, and I just wanted to keep the dance. I mean, I love dancers and they're always kind of getting the short end of the stick it seems. I just said, maybe I can just fund it myself [laughs] and he can do more of a show rather than a street performance, a chance-encounter thing. They were gonna be dressed in pedestrian clothes and kind of make the connection between the pieces and the people walking by, but Lever House, for liability or whatever, couldn't do that. I just didn't want to axe it, especially because John was really looking forward to it. John: And I always wanted to do a full-length work. I was in the Dominican Republic and David called me and said the Lever House thing wasn't going to happen, so I said maybe we could find another venue. I just thought it'd be a good time for me to make a full-length work, so I pitched it to him. We added live music, lighting. It was supposed to be two days, and then it became the whole summer.

David: Well, after all those rehearsals—

John: David got more excited as we got more into it, and I think the more he got excited the more willing he was to invest. It's sort of a gift to New York, because we're employing 10 dancers, and all the money is going directly into public and private schools for arts education [100% of ticket sales benefit the nonprofit Education in Dance and the Related Arts]. And I'm able to have an entrance as a choreographer in New York City.

Sean: When I saw all the proceeds were being donated, I thought maybe you were funding it,

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David.

David: That's what's going on.

Sean: How did the dancing function in the original vision for the Lever House show?

David: The dancers were going to go out during lunch and start slowly doing this choreographic, slightly improvised movement.

Sean: So when you found out you could do a full-length show, you just ran with the ideas?

John: I studied all the pieces. It's very obvious these are people who are going through some type of transformation. I took every character and built a story around them. It's about a community of people. The show is a response to [the Lever House show].

Sean: The show is about rebirth - or, to be more religious, resurrection - but it's also a kind of rebirth for each of you. David, you're showing art in galleries again, and John, you're doing classical dance again. David: It's a whole new chapter. Kind of going back full circle to what I started. Upstairs of that theater [Theatre 80, where Transcending Form is being performed] is where the genesis of the Lever House show came from. My studio was above Theatre 80 twenty years ago.

John: Oh, those pieces were created in that studio?

David: Yeah. John: Oh my God.

David: The top floor, and eventually the top two floors, were my studio. '90 or '91 to '95. I was showing a lot in galleries at that time. That was a great studio. It was my first studio.

Sean: John, you got your professional start dancing in the Paul Taylor II company, but then you got involved in more mass entertainment.

David: Just trying to make a living, I guess. At the time for me selling photographs in galleries was difficult - that's why I started working for magazines. I just wanted to survive as a photographer. When I started working for magazines and that kind of took off, I just said, well, if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do the best I can and tear it up - make the most interesting photos I can and that looked different than what was going on in magazines at the time.

John: I always made dances, even when I was working in advertising and stuff to make money. I

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always created little choreographed works, in the studio or by myself; I worked with a couple smaller ballet companies or my students in public schools. But working on sets, you always gain something. Being around David's studio, you're learning so much about lighting, costuming, hair and makeup production, storytelling. Sean: Transcending Form is bookended by nudity. You're one of two naked dancers.

John: For me, nudity is all about innocence. David says, when you're born you're naked, when you die you're naked. I wanted to introduce this character who was just pure, free of judgment or influence; once he's sent to earth he has to put clothes on and can work in that earthly world. And then the cycle starts again. It's a storytelling device. People call me and they say like, is it an appropriate show to bring a 12-year-old? And for me I think it's fine, because it's showing the human body in a natural state.

Sean: How does it feel to dance naked?

John: Well, I don't feel naked because the lighting feels like clothing to me. I have one dancer who won't put his clothes on. He was so shy at the first rehearsal and now the stage manager has to ask him to put his clothes on [laughs]. He was introducing himself to audiences butt naked.

Sean: The dancers are diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, body size, training. That's nothing new for dance, but it's still bracing to see.

John: The most important thing for me as a choreographer was, I just wanted to work with nice people. I'm a very sensitive person - I always have to feel comfortable in a work environment. That's why I left the corporate world because I can't function without feeling safe. All my dancers are the most generous, incredible, no-drama people.

Sean: The choreography is beautiful but it's rather simple - pure.

John: My choreography is not meant to impress anybody. I just wanted it to be really honest.

David: I think we're post-Cirque du Soleil, post-music video dazzlement. What John is doing - it's beautiful movement, but he's never pushing the dancers farther than each one's particular limit. I think it really works. Personally, I don't need to be dazzled. I love seeing the heavy girl come out and just seeing her face, or the older woman's passion. She's incredible. It's a very happy show. It makes me feel life-affirmed when I see it. It's this very beautiful human plane. I see all these relationships when I watch it. I just really fell in love with it.

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Sean: You guys both went to the same high school, North Carolina School of the Arts.

David: Twenty years apart. It really bothers John when I say, oh, we met in high school. They go, where did you meet? The same high school. [Laughs]

John: It doesn't bother me.

David: Dancers were my first models, and I love being around dance.

John: I thought you said all your first boyfriends were dancers?

David: No, some of them were. And again, that's why it's really nice to put this money back into arts education, because they're just cutting art all over the country. It's a crisis. It's really tragic. As artists, we have to put money back into the arts.

John: Yeah, this organization, Education in Dance, the only reason they're able to go to some schools is because the schools take their field-trip money and use it for dance lessons.

Sean: How long have you been involved with Education in Dance?

John: I've known the woman who founded it since I was 18, so ten years. Sean: How did you and John meet?

David: Through Amanda Lepore. [Laughs]

Sean: The elephant in the room, so to speak! I was going to ask about her.

John: It was a Halloween party.

David: She was hosting.

John: I think I was lying on the floor, doing something. It was at Plaid.

David: She was like, You're going to like this guy, he's a dancer. I talked to him and John invited me to come watch a show at Paul Taylor.

John: He called me for like six months but I was so nervous, because he's David LaChapelle. Finally I agreed to meet him. We talked right there [points to a corner of the restaurant].

David: No, here [pointing to table they're sitting at].

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John: No, no, no, bambini! We were right there. You were there reading a script and your foot was up on that stool. I swear to God.

David: It was here, but anyway.

John: No, it was right there. I swear to God! [Both laugh.] I was wearing a North Face jacket.

David: We tried being boyfriends for awhile, but that didn't work. But we became best friends, as does happen with a lot of gay people. I don't understand why straight people can't do that, but too bad for them. [Laughs]

Transcending Form runs through August 24 at Theater 80. Tickets are \$15 and 100% of the ticket sales will be donated to Education In Dance and the Related Arts, a not-for-profit organization that brings an integrated movement, music, visual arts, and nutrition enrichment program to preschool through high school students in over sixty New York City area outreach schools yearly.

John Byrne is also presenting Facility of Movement, a performance-based installation presented as part of David LaChapelle's exhibition, From Darkness to Light, which is currently on view at the Lever House. Directed by John Byrne and created in collaboration with the performers, it explores the intersection of spiritual and secular worlds. Performed in and around pedestrian traffic throughout the Lever House gallery and adjacent public courtyard. Facility of Movement runs through August 24, every Wednesday from 1-2 PM at the Lever House, 390 Park Avenue (at 53rd Street).