



Looping Back to San Francisco: Kim Epifano's Web of Art Making

by Julie Potter
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Recently returned from Mexicali, Mexico and currently preparing for her Home Season at the ODC Theater in June, Kim Epifano relishes traveling with the task of making art in another culture. "Traveling internationally is a loop for me because I come back to the home base, but what I've learned after all these years is that everywhere becomes a part of my home. The journey of home becomes a circle or loop, and sometimes it feels like it's a ricochet, sometimes a mandala, sometimes it's grounding and other times stirring."

The bordertown of Mexicali, Mexico is one particular loop for Epifano. After an initial encounter during a southwestern tour with Contraband, she has returned four times in the last 15 years (1997, 1999, 2000, and 2011). While performing at a festival held at the Universidad de Baja California, Epifano built relationships with some of the local dancers, who later visited San Francisco for workshops. This exchange developed into an opportunity for Epifano to make two different dances in Mexicali with Paralleos Thirty dos, a five-woman company.

Epifano acknowledges the harshness for the community living on the border and recalls how crossing is nerve-wracking, especially going into the states. "With people so afraid to go to Mexico, working there is political in a lot of ways, and the more we penetrate that, the more it shows that Mexicali is a vibrant place...I made my home in a trailer one block from the border, where the high chain link electric fence always had a daunting feel. Sometimes I would cross the border by foot between Mexicali and Calexico to make phone calls. That was before I had Skype. It was always terrifying to go over the border; the thought of not being able to get out or back in always crossed my mind. I recorded the clinking, just sitting at the revolving gate. We used it in the sound score for the piece we made called Calida Fornax (which means "warm oven" in Latin) the phrase from which California got its name," wrote Epifano, documenting the 1997 visit. "I was drawn back, Calida Fornax was so powerful and we matched each other so well. It was a great exchange between two countries. That relationship kept building and Hildelna Jauarez, one of women I worked with on Calida Fornax and Deseos Desnudos, is one of the main professors at the University de Baja California."

For the most recent visit, Epifano spent seven days in Mexicali, during which she taught master classes and composition at the university and created a site-specific work with the students. "I love that it's a border town. The culture is quite mixed—almost like no place or no time zone, in a good way," said Epifano. "Its not only encountering a community on a border town, it's a loop of knowing people for such a long journey and the artwork that I do that keeps bringing me back to them. Therefore, it's a circuit of artistic and professional relationships that keeps going around."

In addition to teaching at the university, Epifano engaged a group of dancers in a rapid speed process to make a dance music video in a bar they used to frequent, called Cantina El Norteño. At 60 years old, Cantina El Norteño is one of the oldest bars in town. "Every time we went to the bar we'd be dancing wildly and singing songs, with peanuts and beers and clamatos...The bar is a museum in its own right. All the photos on the wall are a very unusual collection of old Mexico photos with movie stars and wars and hunting themes. The place is covered in old photos, so it's historic in there," recalled Epifano. Capturing the site-specific dance on film allows for both the dancers in Mexicali to show the work and for Epifano to feature it during her home season at the ODC Theater.

"Luckily I know many dancers in Mexicali and they are very proud of the work we had made in the past together. So they trust me as a director, choreographer; with visioning an idea and making it a reality with them. With no money we got together a group of 7 dancers and 3 musicians. We had 3 hours of studio time and 4 hours at the bar Norteño. I felt indulged by these wonderful artists whose warmth, passion, and commitment to this moment together empowered all of us," wrote Epifano. One of the dancers Epifano previously worked with has a band, Pura Pulpa, which provided the music, a mix of the traditional tunes from Mexico and original compositions with the sounds of the guitar, violin and tambourine.

In the studio, Epifano made quick assignments and tasks, creating sections to set in the long narrow area of the bar. On site, they placed the sections and performed the dance as a local videographer shot the work. "People would walk into the bar and just sit in the booths or try and sell something or want to play music and become a part of what was happening. The bartender just let us take over, all the while the performers were drinking beer as they performed," Epifano recalled.

Looking to her performances at the ODC Theater this June, Epifano hopes to "Gather the pieces and places, the interactions of artists nationally and internationally, demonstrating the many different important loops and relationships that have occurred for me as an artist living in this busy hustling world, and how what really matters are those connections that occur when the art gets made." Because of her wide web (which traces back to Contraband and Dance Brigade), much of Epifano's work has been created and performed outside of San Francisco. The upcoming home season brings the international threads back to this community, which Epifano has called home for more than 30 years.

In addition to the dance film from Mexicali, titled *Solo Lo Que Fue*, the program of Epiphany Productions Sonic Dance Theater features Heelomali, a multi-media work developed with composer and digeridoo master Stephen Kent (of KPFA's World Music Hour), and Burmese harp player Su Wai, as well as Alonesome/Twosome, a duet inspired by an air mail drawing sent to Epifano by renowned artist Remy Charlip and featuring live music by Epifano and Kent. Epifano's photography from around the world will also be on display in the ODC Theater lobby.

Musing about her travels to places like Ethiopia, Turkey, China, India, Tunisia and Vietnam, Epifano wondered how to conduct cultural exchanges from her San Francisco home base and bring the experience of travel home. In this reversal, she engaged the Bay Area group, Refugee Transitions, forming a mentoring program for young teens arriving in the United States. For example, the Burmese harp player Su Wai performing in Heelomali, was introduced to Epifano through Refugee Transitions. Epifano is also working with two girls from Nepal and six Liberian teens. Stephen Kent mentors the Boys' Band of Burma also from this organization. Epifano begins these interactions by inquiring what the youth already know—what dances, what songs—and lets the exchange unfold from there. Whether near or far, Epifano is a global citizen, embracing the cultures of the world for art making, connection and change.

Epiphany Productions Sonic Dance Theater's 2011 home season is June 17-19 at the ODC Theater. For tickets, visit odctheater.org or call the box office at 415-863-9834.

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