

Jezebel

Cherish Menzo is a rock-solid, captivating performer. In her solo *Jezebel*, premiered during the To Voice Festival at Frascati on 5 November, she revisits the video vixen, an ideal avatar to touch on very current and polemic debates such as new forms of feminism and misogyny in hip hop culture. A shorter version of the piece already earned her the Fringe Award 2019, and this polished premiere confirms: Menzo is a force to be reckoned with, not only as a dancer, but also as a brave maker of her own work.

Jezebel starts with Menzo entering the space in slow-mo, trundling in on a silver lowrider in white, opulent fur and underneath it, a pink latex bikini, a golden chain, sneakers, tube socks and bare legs. Is it a woman? Sure, maybe, but first of all it is an image. And Menzo cleverly feeds our curiosity as to what configures it, one breadcrumb at a time.



Props, costumes, make-up. Twerky moves, grimaces, gestures of coolness. Lyrics. Menzo's choreographic and movement-based research was fed by all sorts of elements that are informed by the vixen – female models of colour appearing in hip-hop videos, very popular in the late 90's, sexual objects symbolizing wealth and success or empowered women within the musical industry (depending on who you ask). As the avatar Jezebel gains in depth, the appearance and progressive discovery of these elements provide the piece with structure. Menzo herself, all the while, is on fire on stage. Slightly aloof and committed, really in it, her presence is all-encompassing and sweeping as she flows from one scene to the next. One cannot look away from her, nor stop wondering what she – or he, or it – is about.

Thought-provoking and witty, well-structured and well-paced, Jezebel is effective on many levels. Menzo herself is the piece's biggest asset, but the outstanding work of musician Michael Nunes certainly helps in keeping the audience engaged with her journey at all times. Dramaturgically the piece is also rich and clever, channeling thought without falling into moralistic stances or over-evident illustrations. For example: halfway along the piece, Menzo throws herself onto the floor, crawling under her fur with her back towards us. She breathes and pants into a microphone, and when she starts singing her voice comes out modulated, unrecognizable, difficult to

understand... A suspense is built, we want to know what she is saying, why she is saying it... until finally she stands up to sing loud and clear, now accompanied by the projected lyrics to the song Oochie Wally on the back: “He really taught me how to work my body / He really taught me how to do it with my mouth / He really really tried to hurt me hurt me / I really love his thug and gangsta style”. Ah, OK. We didn’t just hear it now, we listened. And that might have been the only point.

Maybe it’s too easy a link to make, but Menzo, who was one of the dancers in Liesbeth Gruwez’s *The Sea Within*, resembles the Flemish stage-monster in a couple of things. They are both dancers with the ability to commit fully to a performance without losing sight of their audience for a minute. And they both know to surround themselves with talented collaborators, enablers who bring that presence, as happens in *Jezebel*, to a completely new level.

Seen: October 6, Frascati, Amsterdam.

<https://www.frascattitheater.nl/jezebel-cherish-menzo-eng?language=en>

Photo: Bas de Brouwer.

Concept, choreography, performance: Cherish Menzo
I lighting design: Niels Runderkamp
I music: Michael Nunes I costumes: Daniel Smedeman
I dramaturgy: Renée Copraij
I consultants Berthe Spoelstra, Christian de Yav & Nicole Geertruida
I singing coach: Shari Kok-Sey-Tjong.

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Dancer and choreographer Cherish Menzo: “The anti-racism movement is not just about one issue, there are many issues and they’re layered”

Two months of (artistic) lockdown have brought choreographers and dancers to a precarious position. In a dynamic field that is usually centered on live action, urgent questions have arisen around working for the stage.

Movement Exposed talked to Cherish Menzo, multifaceted dancer and choreographer.



*How have
you*



experienced the lockdown?

It made me feel so stuck, I couldn't move as freely as I wanted, I couldn't be near my family, which in times like these becomes super important. It made me think about the notion of home, and where home is for me. It was confronting.

I was supposed to start the tour of JEZEBEL in March, but all the shows were cancelled or postponed. And all my rehearsals for Jan Martens' new production, too. At first, I didn't mind slowing down, and I felt no need to create work based on this situation. I'm in a very privileged position, my performances were rescheduled to this autumn. I still have work waiting for me, it's not as if I have no perspective – if all goes well, that is.

What would you say are issues that have come up during the shutdown of the theatres?

We Are Public has this new project, called the *In Art We Trust Fund*. They select 15 artists every month and offer them financial support for either existing projects or new ones. When they called me, it felt great to be selected, but I felt a little strange about the financial help. I thought of my colleagues, all hard-working independent artists. Some receive support, but many didn't. I feel responsible for their visibility, too. I see them and appreciate their hard work. I know their situation; I've also made art out of a great need without any financial support.

It's a tough world for artists. This is our job. It's a real job, but it almost feels like what we do is just arts and crafts – it's cute, but not really necessary right now. How can we stress the value of the performing arts in times like these? What are our platforms for doing so? How can we come together? The corona situation has brought up lots of questions around this issue. And it's not about getting pity, it is about equality. I have the opportunity to collaborate with more than one platform to create my work. Working with different people, not being dependent on a single structure gave me a sense of security during the crisis.

Then, unequal opportunities is one issue that has come more to the fore. Would you say social values are becoming more pronounced?

As excruciating as it is, being a person of colour, I exist within a system where I've

almost become comfortable with not fully being a part of it. Or with always having to fight or making up excuses. For instance, I was asked to replace someone in a show. The choreographer was looking for me and the lights went off, and when they came back on, he jokingly said “Ah Cherish, I didn’t see you there”. All my colleagues looked at him disapprovingly and made it clear they didn’t think this was OK. But still I reverted to a deeply ingrained mechanism: I tried to make the situation less hard for him by joking back. By doing so, I implicitly help maintain a system that is ignorant, oppressive and harmful.

I haven’t always felt so strongly about it, I think because a lot of us are taught that the more you have to fight for your place, the stronger you come out of it. There is this general attitude reinforced, in school for instance, but also growing up as a person of colour, where it’s almost expected of you to fight hard. It’s normalised.

Before, I didn’t see injustice, I just saw ignorance and didn’t want to deal with it. The corona crisis with its lockdown has helped me and many others find our voices. It’s a bigger dialogue now. We don’t have to fall into the trap of positive discrimination. It’s not necessary and it only creates more victims. Everyone working in this field needs to join this conversation to understand. Do we feel a need for diversity and inclusion, or is it an obligation?

After the Black Lives Matters protest, I was wary of the way the production houses and platforms for whom I work would react. What does it truly mean when they say something on social media? Taking a stance by signing a petition or posting on social media, is easy. The anti-racism movement is not just about one issue, there are many issues and they're layered. And they should all be addressed.

Do you feel that the movement gained momentum because of the COVID-imposed measures?

I think the quarantine helped. We all decided to come together without knowing it would be such a massive event. We're taking a stand at a critical point in time. Had we not been so constrained, the protest may have been more diluted.

The protest and the primary decisions for fundings happened almost at the same time. How did that inform and affect the conversations around you?

I've been having exchanges with people about these topics in relation to funding and arts policies. It's quite delicate because there are people of colour working in production houses, so there is the question if they are helping to maintain institutions that are not culturally diverse enough. People have been talking about diversity for years and yet we're still not really tackling it. In funding policies the word urban now seems a synonym for inclusivity; I

think it's shocking that in 2020 we're still thinking like this. We have to address the inequalities now. We need to take risks in order to grow. It doesn't mean that now there should be a person of colour on every board; it would be great if whoever has power is informed and educated, has empathy, and is understanding towards the issues.

As a black maker, I wonder if it is the climate in the art scene that makes me create work in which I question this political body. If it weren't such a topic, would I still be so concerned with it? When I first started, it was the first thing I tried to move away from. Because I thought if I used that, it would be what was expected of me and my black body. I ended up fighting it too much and trying to make "Western contemporary" works. And even then, in a review, someone saw Venus or Serena Williams, while I was working so hard not to be associated with the stereotype of my body.

Where, when, and how do you think the whole issue accomodating to discrimination starts?

When I think about my time at school I realise a massive change is needed there. We navigate the information we are given there to enter the work field. And I felt systemic discrimination and oppression during this process. I didn't receive my *propaedeuse* certificate after my first year, not because of my grades but because I was too polite. I had it then and still

feel it now, it's a cultural thing, it's how I have been brought up by my parents. I was always taught to be polite and modest and not to be too loud, to make sure I could blend into the crowd. I felt that my teachers expected me to be an angry black woman. That is a cliché that stereotypes me and whether applied consciously or not, creates false expectations. It has to change.

- [Cherish Menzo](#)

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