

# THE UNCANNY MIX OF LUDICROUS AND DANGEROUS



LEA PISCHKE ON SASHA AMAYA'S SOLO FOR BOY

*When you read the piece's title, "Solo for Boy", you do inevitably have expectations: one person, one gender. And the one representing that gender must have a low degree of facial wrinkles. But it is exactly these expectations which will become a sixty minutes lasting playground of what we, the audience, might consider or recognise as a "beautiful white male".*

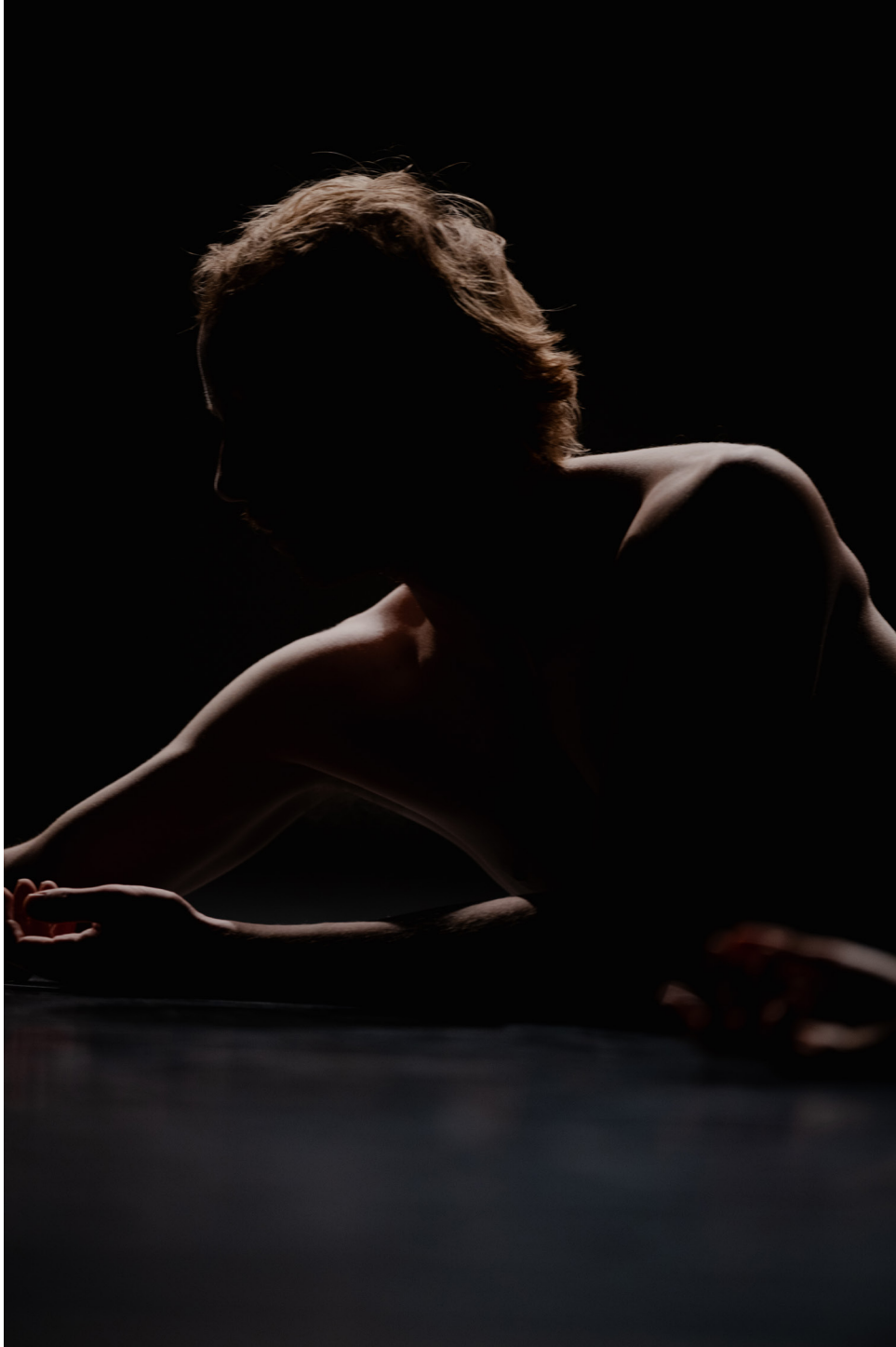


Photo here + cover photo: Peter Oliver Wolff

The stage is shrouded in twilight, forcing pupils to dilate to their maximum aperture. Clouds of fog are hanging in the air. The atmosphere feels pressured, brooding. Somewhere in the smoke a person's outline become barely perceptible, torso nude. The boy? A human, rather. The undulating, plain movements of this body placed on the ground mark a pathway from centre-stage to the back. Occasional joint locks and puffed up shoulders slowly dilute back into the darkness. Heavy, regular breathing trickles from the loudspeakers.

The proscenium lights open, the fog clears up and off we go: enter the "boy". The audience is given the delight of instant gratification: yes, that's the one we know from school. Yes, this is the young urban white male we all too well recognise: milky skin, cute face, plump gaze, pumping muscles, speaking the universal language of fitness: push-ups, knee-ups, skipping, lunges. The grammar is complete.

Yet, the dramaturgical knack of "Solo for Boy"'s beginning, opposing the piece's first minutes of fogginess with crisply lit clarity, gives us this little tickle of uncertainty: will we be given what we know so well? When will the story of the handsome white boy whose world is an oyster begin?

To the music of classical composer Claude Debussy's "L'après-midi d'un faune", the protagonist, nude torso, dressed in light blue denim trousers, bare feet, stretches out under our gaze. He nonchalantly rolls on the empty stage floor, with the occasional acrobatic postures, putting his youthful beauty on display.

The low register of the orchestra's strings seem to underline this oozing vanity dripping out of a snow-white landscape of pecs and biceps. The "boy", narcissistically in love with himself, prances about, blissfully unaware of the onlookers' presence - so it appears - simply happy with his own bodily self. His behaviour poses questions about the audience's role in witnessing all of those actions: do we accompany him with the indulgent gaze of a loving parent? "He's a bit silly, he's quite into himself, but isn't he cute!"

As the piece further unravels, the audience partakes in an emotional ride which is best described as an uncanny dance between the ludicrous and



Photos: Peter Oliver Wolff

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dangerous of the “young white male”. The sound design moves on to a harder beat. The lights change and so does the relationship of the “boy” with us, the public seated in front of him. He starts walking at a firm, brisk pace. Crossing the stage in an orthogonal fashion, he repeatedly comes close to the first row of seats, looking at us.

His gaze will become instrumental for the remainder of the piece: we are glanced at. We are scanned with fierceness. Images flicker in front of one’s inner eye: MEN magazine, Paris fashion week, Taliban fighters posing on trucks with machine guns, their eyes framed with khol, the carefully groomed hair-does of young Masai warriors, a video of young recruits of the Egyptian police force, Instagram clips of CrossFit instructors, profile pictures on Grindr, the list goes on.

The innocent show-off has clearly moved on to the next level: the overconfident parading. With every cat walk towards the audience, the “boy’s” facial expression changes as much as his gait. With every iteration, his cheeks, eyebrows, lips and eyes turn into a platform for pride, power, threat, disdain and lustiness whenever close to the public. A very expertly choreographed facial sequencing of stereotypical “male moodscapes”, highlighted by their decontextualised presentation like pearls on a string, inject in me, the author of this text and a member of the audience, this mixed feeling of both recognition and distance, of comfort in knowing, and discomfort in not approving. We are prompted a palette of relating to the world that seems to exclude smiles and a genuine engagement with the other.

It is at this point that we touch here on an essential aspect of “Solo for Boy”, this odd mix of both relatability and alienation: in as much as we respond to the presented stereotypes, we are also kept in check by the portrayed puppetry, the inhumanity that seems to be part and parcel of every posing action.



Photo left: Dieter Hartwig, Photo right: Peter Oliver Wolff

As the beat fades out, the piece drives towards its striking and unsettling high. A person that we might identify as a woman, dressed in black, rolls a black box onto the stage, opens the lid and takes out dozens of small, fluffy, electrified puppy toys. She switches them on and carefully places them on the floor, her actions accompanied by curious looks from the “boy”. Shrill squeaks, mimicking puppy yelps, electrically pitched up to an obnoxious level fill the air. The four-legged toys robotically move, wag their little tails and flash their pink lightbulb eyes, scattered all over the place. Under the attentive gaze of both audience and the person dressed in black, the “boy” inspects the toys, and starts shovelling some of them into a corner of the stage with his feet. Several squeaking puppies end up being piled up, tossed together, literally cornered. The “boy” then lifts his foot and

stomps on them.

Repeatedly.

Until the puppies’ squeaking stops.

With every second passing, the level of violence increases: Like a nervous hunter, the “boy” now scavenges the stage, seeking opportunities to destroy a puppy, to rip it apart, to bang it against the wall, to crush it with his foot, or to simply flick its off-switch under its belly. The stage fills up with puppy toys’ body parts: limbs, batteries, wires. The mission is clear: he will only stop until

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Photos: Peter Oliver Wolff

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every single one of the puppies on stage stops moving and yelping. And so we, the audience, sit in both awe and terror, watching the massacre unfold over lengthy minutes, emotionally impacted by the scene's metaphorical, yet powerful, analogy to mass murder.

The reason why the female identification has been mentioned earlier, is to open up the wealth of readings and framings that this particular scene provides. It is a significant moment in the piece which lets the audience viscerally react to the violent gestures, and wonder about the meaning of her intervention, the choice of prop, the relationship between the puppy-placer and the puppy-crusher, the link between this scene and the preceding ones.

Does the puppy-placer represent “the female”? Does she ridicule the male in his destructive behaviour by giving him “something to kill” in the shape of the most harmless and innocuous toy that can be found on the market: a puppy dog? Is she going to fill the stage with cuteness and put him in the box, and usher him, the potential perpetrator, off stage, thus curtailing his



Photo: Peter Oliver Wolff

possible malevolent intentions? Is she the one who “holds the reins”, who is in charge? Is she the one who decides “Look, people, that's the dumbest thing you can do with your life: destroy puppy toys for the sake of destroying. That's how it looks like. Unidimensional, unjoyful, non-complex and downright boring.”

In this scene, another very essential aspect of “Solo for Boy” presents itself: the uncanny mix of both ludicrousness and danger in white cis-male behaviour. The “boy” might appear funny and laughable in his earnestness (“I. Must. Destroy. The. Puppies.”), but it is exactly this mindless determination combined with physical strength which can become deadly for many people outside the theatre, in real life.

As the “slaughtering” finally comes to an end, silence sets in. The “boy” sits down in front of the audience, relaxed resting posture, chin down, his gaze unfocused. He sports that eery thousand-yard-stare which combattants have been reported to display after repeated exposure to unsettling, traumatising events, events they may have witnessed or may have caused themselves.

The “boy” gathers himself, looks up, eyes focused, and addresses the audience. But his voice is not his alone. He is prompted by the person clad in black sat near him. “She” says: rephrase. So “he” rephrases. “She” says: develop. So “he” develops his thought. “She” says: empathise. So “he” appeals to the audience's feelings.

It is a peculiar ping-pong game that again carries the uncanny, the mix of ludicrous and dangerous, the wrangling with proximity and distance. Is the “boy” trying to justify his past actions? Is this the deadly juvenile male-ness that we all forcibly agreed upon as humanity and have been for thousands of years? So why complain now? Is the audience complaining? Is this the reason why the “boy”, the fitness-conscious Dave, the selfindulgent Mathieu, the horny-as-fuck Ragnar, the cool dude Felix, the private\* Esteban, is finally talking to us? And why is he being directed, helped, if not to say, monitored by the figure in black to his side? Can someone be beautiful and destructive? Is destructive behaviour an odd expression of beauty? And if we think so, what makes us think so?

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The cornucopia of questions emerging during the piece in combination with the development of multiple performer-audience relationships make for the strength of “Solo for Boy”. By carefully placing elements of the theatre apparatus into its dramaturgy - shifts in lighting, sound design, the use of a portable fog machine and occasional entries of another performer - the choreographer cunningly explores notions of young white male beauty in its bodily, representative and societal dimensions. The piece unfolds as a thoughtful play on the “blatantly” obvious, yet without ever fencing off any potential curiosity towards sideways interpretation. With the occasional introduction of another performer onto the stage, who dances with the “boy” without ever fully interacting, who copies without ever mimicking, we find ourselves wondering about the “boy”’s need to spring off, oppose and rub against the “other”...whoever that may be.

In “Solo for Boy”, that which might seem at first as yet another take on a group of people who are staunchly keeping their place at the top of humanity’s pecking order, reveals itself as a dance piece with many twists up its sleeve, twists which have the audience wondering why they want to chuckle, and why they might at times awkwardly nod - in disapproval.