

Impresario of the Undefinable

DANCE? MUSIC? POETRY? **MARC BAMUTHI JOSEPH** IS BREWING UP SOMETHING UNIQUE AT YBCA.

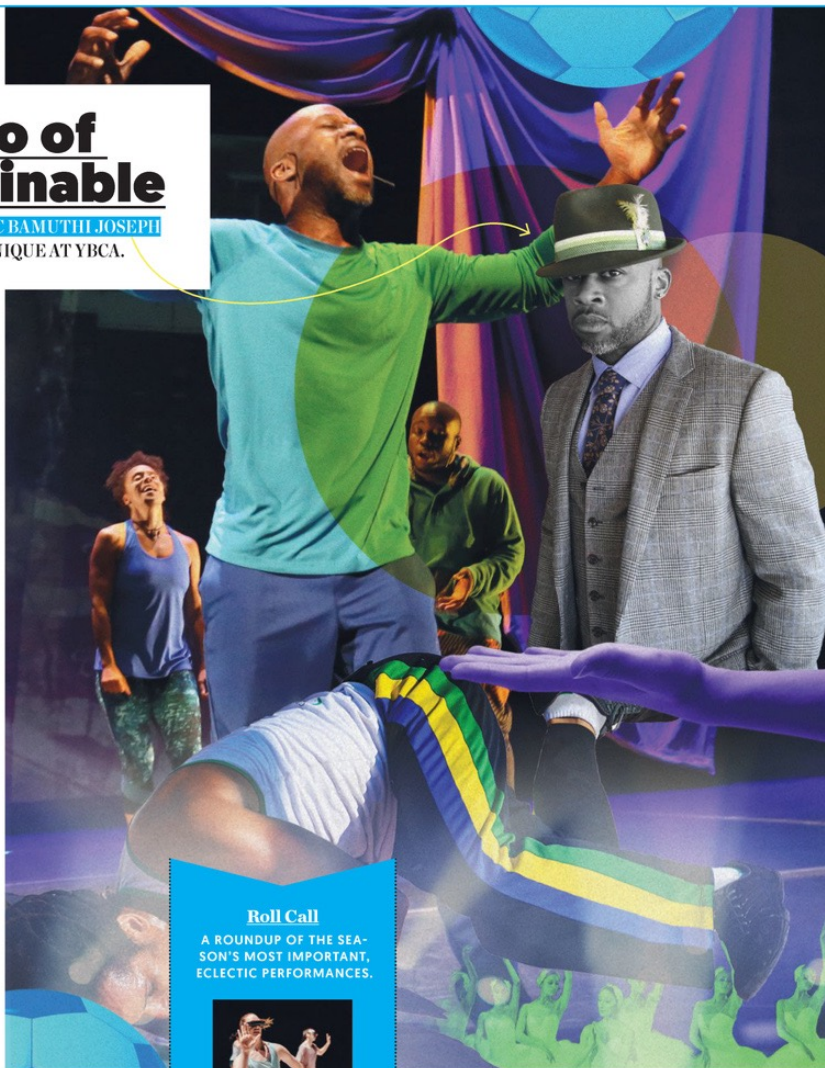
BY RACHEL HOWARD

Marc Bamuthi Joseph gets around a lot these days. In the past year, he's been in New York, performing his latest hit mélange of spoken word and movement; in Philadelphia, collaborating with modern dance giant Bill T. Jones on a new opera; and in Southern California, developing a new play at the South Coast Repertory theater. But it's here, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, that his influence is the strongest.

Joseph, the dancer-actor-activist once named a Top Young Innovator by *Smithsonian* magazine, is now entering his fifth year with YBCA, where he first worked as the director of performing arts and now serves as its first-ever chief of program and pedagogy—a title he acknowledges is the result of “what happens when you let a poet name themselves.” If his role seems broad and undefined, well, that's appropriate: Joseph has made his name through a relentlessly diverse range of artistic endeavors, from poetry (he's a national slam champion) to dance to motivational speaking (he was recently named a TEDGlobal fellow). However, to hear him tell it, his mission for YBCA is as straightforward as it is ambitious: to transform the campus from simply a host for touring companies into something more, in his words, “activated.”

Signs of that change can be seen in this fall's YBCA Transform Fest, a weeklong series of dance performances by 10 Bay Area companies and choreographers, taking place September 14–23. The theme is “Why citizenship?”—a question that's taken on new urgency after first emerging during the last YBCA 100 Summit, held in 2015. At that event, Joseph asked attendees to respond to the keynotes by artists Carrie Mae Weems and Theaster Gates. “We had hundreds of questions,” he says, among them “Can we design freedom?,” “What does equity look like?,” and, ultimately, “Why citizenship?”

“In 2015, could we have anticipated a Trump administra-



Roll Call

A ROUNDUP OF THE SEASON'S MOST IMPORTANT, ECLECTIC PERFORMANCES.



MAE: MOTION AFTERAFFECT
Freya Olafson, Yagiz Mungan, and Kineteck Arts, recipients of the Combustible Residency at CounterPulse, present a new work interrogating virtual reality and big data. **Sept. 7–9, 14–16, CounterPulse**

REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP: MOSES(ES)

A work inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's writing and Wilson's travels to North Africa. **Sept. 23–24, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley**



TOP: IMAGES BY BETHANE HINES (2); PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY CLARK MILLER; MAE: JOSH DOORHEE

tion?" Joseph asks. "No, but now we're asking artists to respond to a question that's been alive for all of us the last two years."

As is typical of any Joseph production, the responses are sure to be profoundly varying. Amy Seiwert is a ballet choreographer who doesn't typically broach social inquiry in her formally exacting work. On the other end of the spectrum, Jesse Hewit is a provocateur whose physically ragged dance theater directly confronts audiences with conundrums of racism and privilege. Among the other participants are the female drag queen impersonator Fauxnique and the self-described underground dance theater group Fogbeast.

Joseph's broad collection of influences goes way back. He was raised in Queens by Haitian immigrant parents—his father worked retail in the Trump Tower Tiffany's, while his mother was a nurse. Joseph was dually formed by the 1980s crucible of New York City hip-hop and child acting (he understudied for tap legend Savion Glover in *The Tap Dance Kid*). He attended an affluent, mostly white private school in Manhattan, then accepted a full ride to Atlanta's historically black Morehouse College, where he was equally serious about Etheridge Knight and Outkast. A teaching fellowship brought him to Marin County after graduation, and he lived in Bernal Heights and Hunters Point before settling in Oakland with his wife, a kindergarten teacher, and their now 15-year-old son.

It was in Oakland that Joseph first gained acclaim for hip-hop theater, including *Scourge* (commissioned by YBCA in 2005) and his mixtape-inspired history of hip-hop, *The Break/s* (2008). In 2008, he produced the first Life Is Living Festival, a daylong Oakland celebration of urban environmentalism that included everything from mural painting to petting zoos. To see the lineup he curates is to conclude that he knows practically everyone. "What I see him working to do is build a movement," says Deborah Cullinan, who became chief executive officer of YBCA two years after Joseph began there. His only pitfall, she says, is that his ideas are always shifting. But at heart, "he's a community builder."

But he's also a performer—with a jam-packed schedule. This month, Joseph will be preparing his latest show, */pe-LO-tah/*, for runs in Chicago and New York, as well as collaborating with Jones on the opera in Philadelphia. (Joseph wrote the libretto.) "I'm going to miss my own premiere to be at the Transform Fest," he says, laughing away any suggestion that he's mixing his priorities. Marketing, outreach—those are about getting butts in seats. What I'm interested in is making culture better." ■

Roll Call

SMUIN: DANCE SERIES 01

Ballets by Annabella Lopez Ochoa and Garrett Ammon, along with Michael Smuin's tribute to Sinatra, *Fly Me to the Moon*. Sept. 29–Oct. 7, *Palace of Fine Arts Theater*

MARGARET JENKINS DANCE COMPANY:

SKIES CALLING SKIES FALLING
The company's 43rd season opener and a world premiere. Oct. 12–14, *San Francisco War Memorial & Performing Arts Center*



EPIPHANY DANCE: TROLLEY DANCES

Back for its 14th year and featuring dance from Hope Mohr Dance, Little Seismic Dance Company, and more. Oct. 21–22, *various locations*

MICHELLE DORRANCE DANCE: THREE TO ONE, MYELI-NATION, AND JUNGLE BLUES

Three works of boundary-pushing tap dance from the MacArthur "Genius" grant fellow. Oct. 27, *Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley*

OAKLAND BALLET: LUNA MEXICANA

A family ballet celebrating the Mexican Day of the Dead. Nov. 3, *Paramount Theatre, Oakland*



HOPE MOHR DANCE: RADICAL MOVEMENTS

A series of dance and theater performances revolving around meanings of gender. Nov. 3–12, *CounterPulse; Joe Goode Annex*

LINES BALLET:

THE PROPELLED HEART
A collaboration with singer Lisa Fischer. Nov. 15–19, *YBCA*

DO NOT MISS The East Bay's Prodigal Daughter Returns

Oakland native **Kate Weare** has risen to prominence in her adopted New York City, where she was the inaugural artist in residence at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's BAM Fisher

and has taught at Juilliard and NYU. Weare's latest sensation is *Marksman*, a heart-piercing sextet inspired by Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, which Weare will bring to the Mission's ODC Theater this fall. The 45-year-old—whose choreography unleashes fierce investigations

of the erotic—also collaborated with ODC/Dance on the mesmerizing 2013 performance *Triangulating Euclid*. Then, as now, her performers had a crackling charisma—the kind that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand at attention. Oct. 5–7, *odc.dance* —R.H.



INTRODUCING THEIR BODIES ARE THE CANVAS

WENDY REIN AND RYAN T. SMITH ARE PRESENTING
DANCE'S NEXT GENERATION TO THE MASSES.

Wendy Rein and Ryan T. Smith move like a romantically entwined couple, she lithe and unfurling, he muscular and intense, each as uninhibited as a lover with the other's body. They're just friends, though—and together they're the forces behind the San Francisco dance company RAWdance, which has surged to the forefront of the Bay Area dance scene thanks to their brainily sensual work.

In *Double Exposure*, however, it's their bodies, not their minds, that provide the sparks. The 70-minute show, for which Rein and Smith asked 16 of the West Coast's most thought-provoking choreographers (KT Nelson, Holly Johnston, Joe Goode, and Amy Seiwert, among them) to craft duets, returns to

ODC Theater for a second run October 26–28.

"When we started the creation process, we were very honest with ourselves that the project could utterly fail," says Rein, whose rippling abs belie the fact that she studied computer science in school. Instead, it was quite the opposite: Last summer's world premiere sold out, launching Rein and Smith on a tour that took *Double Exposure* to New York's Joyce Theater and the prestigious Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and put them on the national radar. The October reprise, then, is a chance to witness some physical and emotional risk-taking, but also to catch two artists on the rise. "We put two years of work into *Double Exposure*," Rein says. "It will only get better with time." rawdance-doublex.org —R.H.