



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence

A naked Puerto Rican faggot from America: an interview with Arthur Avilés

Centro Journal, vol. XIX, núm. 1, 2007, pp. 314-329

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37719115>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

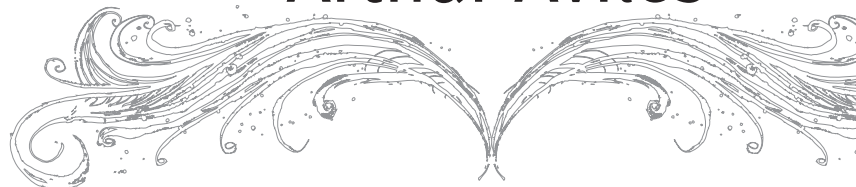


CENTRO JOURNAL

VOLUME XIX NUMBER I
SPRING 2007

A naked Puerto Rican faggot from America

An interview with Arthur Avilés



LAWRENCE LA FOUNTAIN-STOKES

Arthur Avilés is one of the leading Latino modern dancers and choreographers in the United States, and is frequently written about in the *New York Times* and specialized dance publications. His work often focuses on the experiences of gay, and transgender Nuyorican and New York-Rican individuals. He humorously (and critically) approaches queer diasporic Boricua life in the ghetto by rewriting popular tales such as *Cinderella* and *The Wizard of Oz*, which go on to become *Arturella* (1996), *Maéva de Oz* (1997), and *Dorothur's Journey* (1998). He also invites controversy and attempts to shake things up by dancing naked and in drag, and by giving provocative titles to his works, such as *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America* (1996). He coined the term "New York-Rican" as a way to describe the experience of people like himself, who were born in New York of Puerto Rican parents but who are estranged from the Spanish language and from Puerto Rican culture; a lot of his work is about reestablishing connections. He is the fourth of eight children, born in 1963 in Queens, New York, and raised on Long Island and in the Bronx. While in high school, he was a wrestler, a swimmer, a diver, and a gymnast, even though he claims to not have really liked sports. Avilés started dancing in 1983 as an undergraduate student at Bard College and went on to dance with the world-renowned Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company for eight years, from 1987 to 1995, during which time he won a Bessie award. He has been collaborating with his first cousin Elizabeth Marrero since 1990, often presenting Spanglish-dominant dance plays in which she becomes the Latina ghetto mother figure while he plays Arturo, the favorite gay son, and other dancers portray





Members of the Arthur Avilés Typical Theater (AATT): (clockwise from top left) Eng Kian Ooi, Alethea Pace, Masako Koga, Jule Jo Ramirez, Arthur Avilés, and Charles Rice-González. Photographed by Charles Rice-González. Reprinted, by permission, from Arthur Avilés Typical Theater.

Avilés founded his own dance company, the Arthur Avilés Typical Theater (http://www.arthuravilestypicaltheatre.org/), in 1996, and together with partner Charles Rice-González, co-founded an alternative performance space called the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!) in 1998. BAAD! (http://www.bronxacademyofartsanddance.org/) is located at the American Banknote Building (an old factory) in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx and sponsors four festivals per year, including “BAAD! ASS WOMEN” in March and “OUT LIKE THAT!” in June. Avilés is also the director of the Bronx Dance Coalition (http://bronxdancecoalition.org), which published the Bronx Dance Magazine. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes interviewed Avilés as he was preparing for his quinceañero, that is to say, a celebration of his fifteen years as a dancer. The interview, which took place in New York City on 22 April 1998, focuses on Avilés’s choreographies and his collaborations with Marrero and Rice-González.

The origins of Avilés's dance career

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (LL): Let's talk a little bit about how it all started. You started dancing at Bard College?

Arthur Avilés (AA): Yes, in '83. I had some classes in high school, but I had no connection back then, so I really consider that I found dance at Bard.

LL: In high school, you took dance as part of being an actor and learning music?

AA: Right, it was a part of being an actor. I had no connection to dance at all except dancing at parties. And the only relationship I had to my body was through sports. I was a wrestler, a swimmer, and a gymnast. It was not an aesthetic relationship; it was sports-related, which I didn't like. I never liked sports.

LL: And then, when you finished at Bard, you went on to become part of the Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company?

AA: Yes, that's right.

LL: But all along you've also been choreographing your own stuff. Tell me a little about your early works.

AA: Well, one of the first pieces that I did, the second or third one, was called *Counterpoint* [1984]. It's two disco dancers, two ballroom dancers, and two gay dancers, all on stage at the same time. It's a juxtaposition of three different dances and two Mozarts, including "Eine kleine Nachtmusik." It's a six-minute piece. I like it very much so I'm going to bring it back for my *quinceañero* this year.

LL: One of the most distinguishing features of your work has been your longstanding collaboration with your first cousin Elizabeth Marrero. Could you tell me more about the origins of that?

AA: The first piece that I did with Elizabeth was *Maéva: A Typical New York Ensalada* [1990], and it was about me discovering or rediscovering my culture because I had been away from it for a long time. So I asked Elizabeth, "What are the stereotypical attributes to being Puerto Rican?" We made this whole list, and then we created this fifteen-minute monologue. She would just tell the audience every stereotypical thing you could know about a Puerto Rican person: that we have a lot of kids, play music, dance. You name the stereotypical thing, she says it. It's also a lifting of that Puerto Rican ghetto matriarch, seeing her for who she is. At the very end, she gets to just be herself.

LL: And while she is reciting that monologue, her children are dancing?

AA: They are pushing her down, they are dancing around her, they are challenging her. They call her a spick...

LL: Do they have solos?

AA: They have little dance solos, really just illuminating the individual. There are four dance solos in it, one for each person. And Elizabeth is just like the mother of all these kids. When she says, "We have lots of kids. We have this kid, that kid, that kid!" and they keep coming out from underneath her, and they go back underneath her again, they push her down. You know, they are her joy and her complete torment.

LL: You then went on to choreograph *Maéva/Middle March*. What was that about?

Elizabeth Marrero, and Bill T. Jones with Arthur Avilés, and we saw that I was doing a juxtaposition. So I just took that bent, we put the text in Spanish, we made Elizabeth into Maéva, and see how it works from there. People can make any kind of relationship they want with it. That's what's nice about the piece. I thought the structure was clear enough that you can just play with it. I think that's what makes it classic: if you can change it and it won't break the structure of the piece, it will still ring shiny. And I called it *Maéva/Middle March* because Bill was reading *Middlemarch*. Do you know that book? I forgot who wrote it.

LL: George Eliot?

AA: Yeah. And I had no idea, I had never read the book, I just thought it was a great title. Isn't this hilarious? I mean, you can take these things, right, and you can just put them out there and people will think all these things about it. You know they'll think, "Oh, *Middle March*, OK, so now we are going to have to read *Middlemarch* in order to see your piece." You know there's going to be a relationship because you will make one. You will create that yourself. People will read that and then they'll see the piece and they'll say, "Oh, there's a relationship between this, that, and the other," and you're like, "I never meant that. I just named it. I liked the title! I liked Maéva, and I like *Middlemarch*."

LL: [Laughs.] That's very postmodern.

AA: Yeah, it is. About juxtaposition. I think from the very beginning I have been about juxtaposition, with the go-go dancers, the disco dancers, and the ballroom dancers. I didn't know what to do with the juxtapositions then. Now I think I do.

“ We broke up because we had to go in different directions.”

Relationship with Bill T. Jones and breakup

LL: In addition to being in his dance company, you were also Bill T. Jones's boyfriend. How long did your relationship last?

AA: We were together for about five years.

LL: Was that after Arnie Zane died?

AA: Yeah. Actually, right after Arnie died.

LL: And when did you break up?

AA: We broke up around '94 or '95.

LL: So you broke up with Bill around the same time that you left the company?

AA: First we broke up. Then I stayed with him [professionally] for about a year. We broke up because we had to go in different directions. I wanted to create my own dance company and he wanted to continue with his company. I just couldn't do that

for a couple of reasons. One was that, well, we broke up. But I could deal with that. Bill and I, we still connect with each other. I go to his house all the time with [Rice-González] to have dinner, so it's not like that kind of breakup. But I couldn't stay in the company. I wanted to create my own dance company.

about myself and my breaking up with Bill, to that. Whether the audience knows or not doesn't matter to me, because I think what they got was this kind of qu... dancing to Dolly Parton and saying good-bye. And then I turned it into this... about a Puerto Rican matriarch, Elizabeth [Maéva], in that big dress, with L... [Blanquita], her child, and that relationship that they have as a little "white... and a Puerto Rican matriarch.

LL: I saw you perform *Untitled* as a solo at the Point [The Point Community Development Corporation, in Hunts Point] in 1997. You had big cloth wings.

AA: Right, the wings are about flying away. It's about the end of a relationship. It's also about naïve innocence.

LL: But how does that work when you throw Maéva in?

AA: It's her son.

LL: Does it have to do with breaking up with Maéva?

AA: Yes. In Blanquita's case, at the very end, she says "I will always love you" and she just flies away, saying "This is who I am in your life, but I need to do my own thing now, I need to go away." That's why Elizabeth cries at the very end. She realizes a little bit of a rumble in the relationship, and that her son or her daughter is going to leave her. Then I do this little dance, and the piece ends with me kind of flying away.

LL: Do you do sign language in this piece?

AA: A lot of it is sign, and some of it is just made up.

LL: And there are two Dolly Parton songs?

AA: Yeah. But they are not both signed. The first one is danced, and the second one is signed. Or mostly signed, because it's really interpreted. It's taking the sign language and then blowing it, making it bigger, turning it into bigger movements rather than keeping it small. Sign language happens down here, in this area down here, you know?

LL: Near the chest.

AA: Right, so I have to take it out into movement...

LL: Near the face.

AA: That's how it was born in sign language and was taken out in order to move around the stage.

Controversy in Puerto Rico about audience response (1996)

LL: When you performed *Arturo es el muñeco de Maéva* in Puerto Rico as part of the *Rompeforma* festival, Susan Homar wrote in her review that she was disturbed by a certain moment, you asked the audience "What are you laughing at?" Do you remember that?

AA: As much as I was annoyed by her pointing it out without talking about the piece, I did hear what she had to say. All she could see was my anger, that reaction that I had to the audience laughing at something I didn't want them to laugh at. I can't remember exactly what it was, but there was a place where the audience laughed that I felt was condescending. But I didn't really have to react in that way. I did. I agree with her there. You know, my ego was in the way. It was super-stupid for some stupid reason. I was stupid to do that.

LL: Overall, what is your impression of dancing in Puerto Rico? I mean, what was your reception been, when you've danced there?

AA: I think it's been great. I think people have received me really well. And...



Photographer Richard Shpuntoff. Reprinted, by permission, from Arthur Avilés.

A Puerto Rican faggot from America (1996)

LL: Let me ask you about *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*, which you completely nude with no music. What inspired you to choreograph this?

AA: It started off as a challenge to myself in relation to what dance is, you know, the essence of dance. Take away the costumes, literally; take away what I call pedestrianism; take away stop. If you take away all of those things, you're left down to dance as "the movement of people and things in time and space," to quote Bill T. Jones. See, I went to a couple of presenters and asked them to present me in my works after I left the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. One of them was Mark Russell at P.S. 122 [Performance Space 122] and the other one was Laurie Uprichard at St. Mark's Church. And when I approached them, they said to me, "Don't speak, don't talk. Dance is too theatrical these days. Don't talk, just dance." And I was thinking about that and trying to consider the concept of dance not being anything other than movement. I didn't say anything to them because the work that I do, as you know, is not purely dance; it has a lot of theatrical elements, although always based in dance. So I went back and thought, "OK, I'll take that challenge. I'll do a dance piece that is just the concept of dance, about movement." So like I said, I removed the costumes, there was no lighting, no form of theatricality or pedestrian posture or

LL: And as a result...

AA: So, now we're getting to the structure of the piece. That's what the piece was built on. I structured the piece on constant flow, always moving, never stopping. Rarely using my harsh breath as something audio, as something that people can hear, to, as in if you were to do a movement and you would go "haaaaaa" [exhales]. It started from that base: to always flow, never stop, don't use breath as an audio element, no lights, in other words the lights just come up at the beginning of the piece and then go down at the end. No music because music is an element outside of dance, it inspires dance but it is not dance. And so, now we come to why did I call it *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*? Because it literally states a person down, and the actual image that you see on stage is really a Puerto Rican gay person. That's what it is, that is what you're looking at. Whether you call it that or not doesn't matter. That's the reason why I called it *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*, because that is who I am: I'm a Puerto Rican person, Puerto Rican born [having Puerto Rican parents], of Puerto Rican descent, from America, and I'm a gay man.

LL: And from America you mean the United States?

AA: Yeah.

LL: So, do you think someone else could dance that piece?

AA: Oh yeah, I would hope someone could dance that.

LL: And would you have to change the title if they danced it?

AA: That's a good question! No, I might not change the title. I don't think I would. I mean, I would see. It's funny you ask that because *Arturella* is, as you know, Arthur and Cinderella put together, to make up *Arturella*. And I was thinking of having a girl do my part, and her name is Morgan, so I was thinking of calling it *Morganarella*.

LL: I know that you first did *Blanquita es la muñeca de Maéva* with Morgan, who is white, and it was all about being the "white" daughter, and so it was very tied to who she is as a dancer, and her race and gender and how those things were conceptualized in Hispanic families. And then when you changed it to *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*, it was about being a man and...

AA: Right, being the oldest son, and what place does that son have in a Puerto Rican family. And so she had the same thing, hers was just a little blond-blue-eyed girl in relationship to a Puerto Rican family. That's the only difference. Otherwise, the structure of the piece is completely the same.

LL: You described the movement in *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America* as being very circular, but I saw it as very circular.

AA: Yeah, it was very circular.

LL: There's no jumping.

AA: No, right, there was no jumping in it. That was important to me. There was a lot of sliding, a lot of moving around in circles, trying to be as quiet as possible. That was one of the ideas behind it also, to be as quiet as possible, let the audience listen to their surroundings and just watch this image of a man in space continuously, for 15 minutes. That was important too. I asked the person who was doing the lights to bring the light slowly up at the very beginning.

***Intoxicating Calm* (1993), *Arturella* (1996), Nudity, and Jail**

LL: You performed a piece in Cannes called *Intoxicating Calm* and in that piece you were also naked. Is that a very different piece from *A Puerto Rican Faggot from*

AA: Yeah, because that dealt with lots of theatrical elements. They are very different. One is completely about flow and the other one is about how I was

LL: And so what is being naked in that piece about?

AA: Being naked in any piece is about revealing the self, literally. You know what I mean? This is who I am. That's all. I mean, I don't think it's anything more than that. To do that in America is really difficult. When you perform nude in Europe there's no hoopla. But here in America it's a big deal to reveal yourself, your body. I mean the literal self, I don't mean conceptually.

LL: I know that in *Arturella*, even before you took your clothes off, the administration of Hostos Community College asked you not to.

AA: Just that day.

LL: The day of the premiere? You had told them beforehand?

AA: I told them. It was in all my advertisements: "Nudity in this piece." I think I even said "male nudity."

LL: Your concern was that it be advertised clearly so that no audience member would be surprised?

AA: Yeah, because we know the power of nudity in our society, so there is no surprise for me to play with the ramifications, you know what I mean? So I will advertise. I will let people know that this is what is happening and if you like this kind of thing, come on down! If you don't like this kind of thing, stay away. And I was clear about that. And then that day, Wally Edgecombe came up to me and told me not to do it. And I said, "Well, I'll try not to." He even sent me to the dean of students.

LL: You said you'd wear a skin-colored leotard?

AA: I never said that.

LL: For you, being able to dance naked, you said that it was...

AA: It's part of being an exhibitionist! I mean, I'm not letting that element go.

LL: Besides just challenging general conventions of performance and dance, does it have a relation to your being a gay man, who is affirming that gayness?

“ I think that as a gay man, it is a part of how I define myself, through my sexuality. ”

AA: Yeah, I think it does. The battle about sex and sexuality these days is that as a gay man, it is a part of how I define myself, through my sexuality. I'm a homosexual and I don't have a problem with being a sexual being in the world.

LL: You based your piece *Arturella* on the Walt Disney movie *Cinderella* and you follow it very carefully with some interesting changes, making it into a Nuyorican New York-Rican gay story where the prince becomes the *princeso*. But *Cinderella* is also a very important ballet. How does that tie in?

AA: Not at all. The only thing *Arturella* is connected to is to the Walt Disney movie and what I remember people telling me the original *Cinderella* was about. The story is so pretty, so precious. That's why at the very end I put in that scene where

AA: Right, from the *gangas* and the knives. But otherwise it's straight from the whole structure of it. Literally, even when we learned the movements from birds flying, like a bird flew from the lamppost to the bed, we would make a movement that would go for that period of time. If it took 8 counts, we would count: one, two—it goes up; three, four—it goes down; five, six—it turns around; seven, eight—and then lands on the post; one, two.

LL: So, after your fairy godmother/*madrina* Maéva comes, you do the “Santería” dance.

AA: “Santería... aaaaa.....” [He sings.] And you know what that is?

LL: What is that?

AA: That's Cecil B. De Mille! It was the *Ten Commandments*! So when Elizabeth Taylor was in that, “Santeríaaaaaa,” the idea was that it was like the Red Sea was opening!

LL: And then you get your dress.

AA: A beautiful dress, made by Liz Prince.

LL: And then the princeso's *quinceañero* begins, and you appear in the palace. Then you finally meet him and then you dance. I wanted to ask you, in *Arturo*, the gayness of the piece is brought out by your drag, you're initially dressed up as a maid...

AA: No, it's not brought out through drag.

LL: Well...

AA: That's not how you know I'm a gay person. I don't think so. I think that a lot of drag artists these days are gay, although drag is not necessarily connected to gay people.

LL: I was just beginning to enumerate how it's gay: it's gay because it's about going to the princeso's ball and falling in love with him.

AA: There you go, that's where you know I'm gay. Because I wear a dress I'm sure that's the...

LL: OK. It's debatable. I mean, I think it fits into the whole idea...

AA: Of challenging gender or current ways of looking at gender. Anyway, a guy wearing a dress so people automatically assume that he's gay. For what reason? I get it, you know, because not all people who wear dresses are gay.

LL: You're absolutely correct.

AA: The way you really know I'm gay is when I go to the prince's ball, I meet the prince and we kiss. That's the only way you know I'm gay.

LL: Could you talk to me about the music and the conga drums and the whole scene? What was your motivation? And what is the dancing in that section?

AA: OK, so the music. I was working in a club as a lap dancer, you know, a lap dancer, on 21st Street, between Sixth and Seventh [Avenues, in Manhattan]. That's where I got arrested and went to jail because it was in a residential neighborhood [Chelsea] and they weren't allowed to have it. But anyway, I was working in that club... [Laughs.]

LL: And how long were you in jail?

AA: Just a night, a whole night, which was one of the most horrible experiences of my life. And that was while I was making *Arturo*, actually. A guy who was working with me, my manager, had a tape of a new group called Acid and it was a retrospective that he'd opened back to the pure disco era, with that pure beat, hip, hip, hip...

The 70s are so “in” right now, or even at that time, that was in ‘96. And then brought the congas in with Ángel Rodríguez because I liked the way he played and I thought that maybe he could enhance it with a little bit of a Latino beat. The dancing in it was wild. We followed the way they were dancing in the cartoon, but when I was doing the waltz-type step, Jorge Merced, who is a wonderful Puerto Rican actor from Pregones Theater, took it and changed it to some Puerto Rican social dance step [the *danza*, a nineteenth-century bourgeois/creole social dance]. I don’t remember the name. It’s not the merengue, it wasn’t salsa, it was something else. That’s what’s so wild about working with the people you’re talking about, so amazed. As I told you before, I consider myself a New York-Rican, not connected to the culture in that way, but here I am working with all these Puerto Ricans because I wanted to connect with my culture and they are giving me all this information. Like Ángel, enhancing the disco score with his congas. I just got the free reign, he could do whatever he wanted on top of that score. And here we were dancing and then Jorge says “It’s like the [danza]” and I was like “Wow!” He took what we did on the cartoon into this wonderful social Puerto Rican dance that I had no idea about. I just completely followed him.

LL: That’s wonderful.

AA: And then we took the little snippets from *West Side Story*, you know, the part where we snap our fingers and then we kind of do our legs like that, snap our fingers and bend our knees and then look at each other, that was from *West Side Story*. A couple of other things just like playing around, but mostly taking from the videotape enhanced through a Latino person’s eyes, you know, Puerto Rican eyes. Really, it was his eyes I was looking at all of this through, because I was looking at that slant, that bent on it.

Go-Go dancing and the concert stage

LL: You said you danced in a male stripper club.

AA: Right.

LL: Could you elaborate on the relationship of that type of dancing and your dancing on stage? Being a gay dancer in that environment, and being a gay dancer on the concert stage?

AA: Right, it’s very different. There’s a certain kind of subtlety to sexuality on the concert stage that one needs to have in order to survive in a conservative environment. On the other stage, on the strip stage or the go-go stage, the subtlety of your sexuality is put right up front. I don’t see them as so different. The difference is the way you perform on this stage and the way you perform on the strip stage. Otherwise, we can take the go-go stage and we can put it on the concert stage. We can do that. It’s just that the world at large doesn’t take to it so well. They’re scared of it or they think it’s vulgar. The same thing actually happened in the other direction. Like, I did this one strip contest at King. I won, by the way. [Laughs.] It was being hosted by Joey Arias, right?

LL: Aha.

AA: And I was dancing and doing stuff. And I took my clothes off. There was one part of the dance where I pointed my feet. [Laughs again.] You know, I

LL: Because in the contest at King, you didn't identify yourself as...

AA: As the concert dancer.

LL: You were just supposed to be Arthur Avilés, the gay stud...

AA: The dancer. Right, right!

LL: So in that imaginary, the more working-class, manly and masculine that can be, the better. The fantasy is constructed around that kind of masculinity.

AA: Yeah, but I couldn't go that deeply into it, because I had never considered myself a go-go dancer, you know? I always thought I could dance in a sexy way, you know, if you take a look at the best go-go dancers, they are phenomenal. The way they can get you to get an erection. That person is not so far removed from a concert dancer, who can do that also at a certain point. And so, there I was, a concert dancer, I was gyrating and doing that stuff, but when he pointed at me, he was like "Oh, look, twinkle toes!" [Laughs.] I realized, "Oh, shit," it was a sexual move in the wrong context. As it might be, you know, as some phenomenal sexual move on the concert stage would be the wrong move in that context. It does that mean you do it or you don't do it? You have a choice. If you say, "Oh, I want to do this," you gotta know what kind of reaction you're gonna get. When I go onto the go-go stage and I start pointing my feet, I gotta know that they're gonna start laughing! You know, cause it's not about my feet, it's about my dick. It's about sex, the forceful sexuality, that's what they want. They don't want you to be a dancer, they want you to be a sexual being. They don't care about that!

LL: This is really interesting because I was trying to think about your dancing in *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*, and I was thinking that really the only place that we consistently see naked gay Latinos is in pornography, in porn magazines and porn films. And what you are proposing here is that go-go dancing is an extension of concert dancing but it is also different, I mean, it is not the same.

AA: Right, that's true, it is an extension, that's an important thing to know.

LL: For me, it's really interesting to know that in fact you *have* crossed, you've traversed that whole line or progression of gay dancing.

AA: Sure, and I love it, and I respect it, too. I respect go-go dancing very much. It's just that I personally can't take myself too far into that direction, only because of its social and legal implications. Like I said, I was arrested once and I do not want to get arrested again, because I'm not interested in being in jail, I'm more interested in dancing. The thing is that when that line gets crossed, and you get arrested because of your body, because of the usage of your body, then it really throws my dance into what it is that I can do on the stage.

LL: Because so far, most recently, people aren't arrested on the concert stage, they get their funding cut for doing things that are deemed pornographic.

AA: Right, and we are in completely conservative days. I mean, I'm not sure that it's so different within the last twenty years. Maybe it is. Maybe it's not. It's different now with [Mayor Rudy] Giuliani in charge. You know, a lot of people are telling me what is going on downtown. He's raiding the clubs, he's arresting the players standing outside of a club smoking pot, they get handcuffed and held by the police. And this is happening down in the [West] Village and in the East Village. It's a little extreme, I think.

do that!” But you know, when I got up there and I started to do it, the rule completely changed. Like I said, you point your feet, nobody cares. You gyrate your hips, they care. But *how* do you gyrate your hips? *How* do you do all those things? *How* do you look?

LL: And when you worked in the go-go clubs, how much do you think the way you interacted with you had to do with their perception of you as a Latino?

AA: Oh, I’m sure completely.

LL: Is that something that they articulated?

AA: No, I don’t think so, but I think that that’s what it was.

Maéva de Oz (1997) and Dorothea’s Journey (1998)

LL: Let’s talk a little bit about *Maéva de Oz* and *Dorothea’s Journey*, which are both based on *The Wizard of Oz*.

AA: The two are companion pieces, although they are completely different from each other. *Maéva de Oz* is completely theater, while *Dorothea’s Journey* is completely danced with not a spoken word in it except for an “ahhhhhhh.” You know, when I thought about that is I had no idea that *Maéva de Oz* was theater, but the whole thing was all spoken! Elizabeth does all the parts [Dorothy/Maéva, three farmhands, the Wicked Witch, Glinda the Good Witch, and Miss Gulch/The Wicked Witch]. She goes from character to character, not in a hugely obvious way, but if you really look into it, you would see that that’s what she’s doing. In other words, her personalities were coming out in different ways as the piece went on.

LL: What is *Maéva de Oz* about?

AA: It is about a little girl coming out of the closet. It’s about new sexuality, it’s about a new-found sexual orientation.

LL: But she never kisses another girl.

AA: There is gay reference.

LL: But it’s all spoken. There is no scene in which she dances with another girl. Is there a discussion of that sexuality?

AA: When the tornado happens. Well, actually, the piece begins with this really frustrated little girl, who is constantly confused, frustrated, and upset. To me, she’s a lesbian girl who’s always complaining and really angry at the world. And then the tornado happens, and she runs into the closet to protect herself. But the closet, in the gay world, represents covering yourself, hiding. So I thought it was kind of funny, like a joke. After the tornado is over, everything changes: color comes back to the screen [in the background], she has a new gown on, even Arturoto [the dog, performed by Avilés] turns a different color, he is golden now and the closet disappears away and the very first thing that Maéva says is “Am I gay or am I straight?” And then she goes through this whole little litany about words like *cachapera* and *homos*. She goes through every word that you can speak of in English and in Spanish in relation to a lesbian woman and she realizes this is who she is. She says, “I thought dykes were all ugly... Oh, no, that’s only if they’re bad dykes.” So it’s about a new-found sexuality. And then, that’s where the road begins. She gets up to the yellow brick road, and now it’s time to explore. We tie the purple cape around her and she’s “super” now [Super Maéva], you know she’s powerful. And then the little boy

AA: No, it had no connection to *The Wiz*. Once again, it's just that Hollywood movie [*The Wizard of Oz*] that I fell in love with. It was about the love of all people's performances and how I wanted to get closer to it. And the way I felt I could do that was to connect it to the culture that I'm a part of.

LL: I was commenting to a friend of mine about your piece and he mentioned *The Wiz* because for him, *The Wiz* is an African-American...

AA: Right, an African-American rendition of *The Wizard of Oz*.

LL: And *Maéva de Oz* and *Dorothur's Journey* are, in a sense, a gay and lesbian New York-rican/New York-Rican rendition.

AA: Right, that's what it is. I like taking classic stories like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cinderella*, the classic scaffolding of stories, and testing them—do they work in the Latino agenda? Do they work here? It's a question. And I think so far these stories I mean we can go into it, continue to go down the line, say gay, Latino, work. And yeah, they do.

LL: So *Maéva de Oz* is the first piece, and...

AA: The second piece was *Dorothur's Journey*. So if you put Arthur and Dorothy together, you get Dorothur. And Elizabeth played Toto and I played Dorothy. I go from the yellow brick road to the wizard. And I play all the characters: the scarecrow, the lion, the witch, Glenda, the Wizard, and Dorothy. All these attributes of these other characters were a part of me: love, hate, being cowardly, being brave. All these things are within one person. Each one of those characters—the witch, completely evil, and then Glenda, just so benevolent—we have all these things. The wizard was all this power, it was male power, too. And I decided to put a disco slant to it, because it was a disco score. I thought, "Oh, this would be to juxtapose all these things." It was about receiving all of these things: love, hate, power, all that stuff, and putting them on one person, and this person not really understanding that he has all of these things, and not being able to control it, going crazy in a sense. And then realizing that at one point, and that's when the disco comes in, at the very end, he says "Who are you? Who are you? Now go! Go! Go! Open! Open!" [Singing, Avilés's pitch gets higher with each "open!"] It's about "Who are you? Go! Go forward." You know? And realizing that all these things are on my head—I had a big deconstructed disco ball that would be put over my head...

LL: Oh, it's like the wizard's head!

AA: Right, but this was a disco ball. We had a big deconstructed disco ball put over my head and that's when I became the Wizard. And that's when everything just started to feel like, wow. You feel like such a powerful person now because you realize that

“ We make decisions about where it is we want to be smart and cunning, and where it is we want to be stupid. ”

choose to love when you want to love, you can choose to hate when you want to hate, you can choose to be smart when you want to be dumb, in whatever situation you want to be that in. I think that for Latino people, that's a really important thing to understand because I think that

us at least who were born in New York feel stupid, you know? Just stupid, rather than realizing that "Oh shit, you know?" We make decisions about where it is we want to be smart and where it is we want to be stupid.

and I could feel stupid and I could feel smart whenever I want to, not whenever I want to be over *me*.” So what happens is, I get one arm, and that one arm, it’s a scarecrow arm. And then I get a tail, that’s the lion; the hat, that’s the witch; another hat, that’s the Scarecrow; and then the big head, the big disco ball, that’s the Wizard. And at one point all those things are on me. And then at another point I take them off myself. And then they get put on me and then at the very end of the piece I take them off and I put them in a circle around myself. So what I do is I put myself in the position at which I can take a look at who it is that I am and then go forward from there, not questioning who I am or anything like that cause it’s not about an end, it’s about a journey. It’s about understanding that we have choices. That’s all it is. I can choose love or I can choose fear. I can choose courage or being afraid and that’s my right arm, you know.

LL: Is being gay something that’s relevant in *Dorothur’s Journey*?

AA: That’s a good question! You know, I think only a gay man could have made this piece, because it’s so campy! You know, it comes from such a campy place and gay men definitely have the, what do you call it, the torch for camp.

LL: And *The Wizard of Oz* is certainly a gay icon.

AA: Oh, yeah.

LL: And it has often been read as an emblematic story of the gay experience.

AA: I very much agree with that.

LL: So in that sense it is very much about being gay.

AA: And just the whole wacky premise. I have a dress. I do wear a dress. And when we come back to the concept of drag, is it an indication that someone is gay? But I do wear a dress in *Dorothur’s Journey*.

LL: Because you’re supposed to be Dorothy.

AA: Yeah, and I wanted to morph Dorothy with John Travolta. We wanted to make *The Wizard of Oz* meets *Saturday Night Fever*.

LL: So you’re wearing a skirt?

AA: Yes.

LL: And Elizabeth, what’s Elizabeth’s name?

AA: Totobeth.

LL: Is she wearing slacks?

AA: No, she’s wearing what Arturoto wore. She’s wearing an Arturoto costume. She’s Totobeth, all in white.

LL: But she has open cleavage...

AA: With big white lapels. It’s an Arturoto costume, from head to toe, it’s all white fringe. It’s really a beautiful costume, Liz Prince made it. And on the inside of the white lapels, Elizabeth has a black disco shirt that’s buttoned all the way down and we both wear gold necklaces.

LL: It’s wonderful.

AA: It’s very funny. And Charles plays a role in this too.

LL: He’s a kuroko.

AA: Right, a kuroko, which I think I told you was a character in the classical Japanese theater as a person or an entity that changes things. Like if the main character is happy to go from happy to sad and a costume represents that, a kuroko comes on stage and he changes that costume by maybe pulling one string or dressing the character in a different way.

and he has these pumps, black suede pumps. And he comes in and out of the s
He's the one that gives me my scarecrow arm, my tin-man arm, he's the one w
the witches' hats on me. And then by the very end, because he's this force tha
onto the piece, I touch him, and look him in the eye. He's like the concept of
and we see each other and then we kind of acknowledge each other. In other v
I acknowledge my choice. So, towards the end of the piece he dances with Eli
and me. So we become this threesome: she's my companion right next to me a
the choice, he's a conceptual idea played as Linc from *The Mod Squad*. [Laughs
LL: Elizabeth mentioned to me that the end is a citation of *Charlie's Angels*.
AA: Right, we do a *Charlie's Angels* what do you call it, tableau, but then at
end we do the John Travolta pose from the poster of *Saturday Night Fever*. A
know, that pose is actually quite beautiful, because it points up to the sky an
to the ground. It says "Go fly!" and "Stay grounded!" at the same time. Fun
from the seventies and everyone thinks that it is really superficial but if you
some things—and I don't want to take it too seriously—it's about keeping y
up high. And that's important to poor-class and working-class people. That'
it ends: first with *Charlie's Angels*, and then with another popular iconic thin
a little more universal in my eyes, the concept of pointing up and down and
grounded. I know it's disco... [laughs] and we do the bump in it, we do a litt
of a concept from the seventies called contact improvisation. We don't do c
improvisation but this little concept inside of it was born from that. What
we do? We do the wave, and then we do vogueing, which is eighties, really, s
start to come out of it a little bit, it starts to expand and then it gets smaller
It starts with the seventies and then it just goes where it wants to in relation
to disco, or social dance movement that has a relationship to disco.



Elizabeth Marrero and Art
Photographer Johan Ebbers.
by permission, from Artbur