

HOW TO BE A DANDY IN THE AGE OF MASS CULTURE

Notes on Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*

By Brian Teare

Taylor Mac entered the first decade of American history dressed as a celebration, a head-cheerleader-meets-cotillion-meets-sparklers situation. High wig a draped cascade of parti-colored tinsel. A varsity number tank-top hewn out of foil-like fabric, its blue 3 bedazzled by red rhinestones. Gold lamé gauntlets. Wide hoop skirt flared out with parti-colored tinsel panels that matched the wig. The best part: a modified bustle that rose straight up and spread out a peacock's fan of silver tinsel star bursts framing judy's figure with a couture of fireworks, a camp saint's bright aura. Our Lady of Independence. Our Lady of Revolution. This is what we wear, Mac seemed to suggest, to the birth of our democracy: a manic happy mashup of cheer squad, debutante, and pyrotechnic device. Dressed just like that, judy's America began.

I emphasize this foundational image of Mac's American history not just because Machine Dazzle's costumes are essential characters in the show, but because, as Mac has said in conversation with Jay Wahl, Kimmel Center's Producing Director: "I'm wearing ideas, more than I'm wearing costumes." By vocation and profession I'm a writer and reader of texts, so Mac's idea-driven approach to reading judy's costumes appealed to me as a strategy for reading *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* as a whole. Besides, *History's* profusion of sensory stimuli and its duration offered readerly problems: where to look? what to focus on? what happened while I was in the bathroom? Settled in my seat, I gave myself permission to let go of my need to "catch it all," which I knew would be impossible anyways, given the two twelve-hour performances ahead. I would choose instead to suss out and focus on the ideas behind the images, sounds, and action.

This wasn't always easy to do, given Mac's personal charm, penchant for spectacle, and gift for enchantment, but I dedicated myself to tracking how judy's ideas shaped and curated the highly saturated perceptual surface of the performance. Right away, Mac achieved such saturations through stark contrasts, the way the detail in judy's first bright costume popped against the black background. Stripped to the bare essentials, the stage design was all about providing seating for the band while also facilitating the free movement of cast and crew; its relative blankness allowed the performance to move across time and space largely by other means than set.

In contrast to the literal and imaginative movement onstage, a multiracial group of six women seated in lawn chairs sat placidly knitting onstage during most (if not the entirety) of the first twelve decades – because America was founded, Mac would tell us, on making things. Of course those women were also there at the origins of our democracy, all making out of necessity and some no doubt with secret pleasure. My writing likewise aspires to be a functional, continuous, discreet activity driven by historical and libidinal pressures, so I took notes and photos with my phone. What follows is a series of meditations I began making during the show, writing that offers only one way of reading the two hundred and forty years of American history Mac compressed into twenty-four dense and unforgettable hours.

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One of the show's central ideas is the dual nature of identity. For Mac, identity is both an unwitting re-enactment of the historical violence and systemic injustice intrinsic to the cultures in which we are born, and also a self-made survival strategy necessitated by this violence and injustice. In other words, identity is made impossible for us first, which is why we must then remake it. It is a structure equal parts historical given, citation, critique, and willful self-creation. And if Mac's *History* tells a central story – storytelling is only one of the many things the show is interested in – it is the story of an American identity that, though willfully individualist and ever-changing, is rooted in an unchanging history as revolutionary as it is injurious. So it made total sense that Mac showed up to America's first decade dressed as part eighteenth-century lady patriot, part aftermath of a Super Bowl halftime show.

But obviously it isn't only through costume that *History* explores the idea of American identity. Not unlike Machine Dazzle's costumes – aspects of which appeared to have been sourced from a thousand Jo-Ann Fabrics, wardrobes, thrift stores, and garage sales before being collaged into gorgeous couture creations – the show's score pilfers all registers of American popular culture, from Christian hymn to riot girl anthem. Supported by Matt Ray's lush and versatile arrangements, a selection of songs from each decade both fosters and complicates Mac's explorations of American identity, songs at times delivered with total irony, at times with intensity and identification, and sometimes only partly delivered, cut off halfway through, rejected because of their vile period ideology.

And though the decade- and song-based structure of the show gives it a highly episodic nature, and though its overall genre is a grand vaudevillian collage of cabaret, burlesque, operetta, drag show, performance art, lounge act, circus, musical, commedia dell'arte, and Happening, Mac used moments of earnest banter both to essay about American identity and to tell its story. Judy introduced a quick paraphrase during the first decade of the performance, casting the story of American identity as a rhetorical Q&A:

Q: How do we build ourselves when we are being torn apart?

A: No answer. I just ask it for 24 hours.

This question and the audience laughter after the answer became one of the central refrains during the show's entire Philadelphia iteration, as did Mac's emphasis not on answers but on asking, on actions. Indeed, during the course of twenty-four decades and 246 songs, the actions onstage and in the audience began to seem like forms of asking and answering, building and tearing apart, seeking and not finding, and laughing about it all anyway.

“Worship the act of creation,” Mac urged the audience during the show's opening decade, “Worship the verb.” And then Judy called onto the stage a white woman who introduced herself as Sarah, and we were urged to worship her in charismatic fashion, speaking in tongues and waving our arms about. Mac began singing “Amazing Grace.” And though at first Sarah seemed tentative about serving as the object of loud and ecstatic veneration, before long she stretched out

her arms toward the audience in a kind of blessing. She looked out at us, taking it all in with a big beneficent smile. Our Lady of Verbs. Our Lady of Creation.

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I saw *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* with my white queer femme friend Barrie Jean Borich, a Chicago native and nonfiction writer whose rapturous report of seeing the show in San Francisco convinced me I could not miss its Philadelphia iteration. Barrie is just on the cusp of sixty, a veteran of second-wave feminist and lesbian feminist politics. I'm a white gay man in my early forties, and my queer sense of self was formed as much by the AIDS crisis and AIDS activism as by the feminist politics and activism of the early 90s. Seven years ago I came to Philadelphia after over a decade in the poetry and queer communities of the San Francisco Bay Area. During both shows we sat next to each other in the lower rows of the balcony. I detail all this because such are the politics of Mac's show that it matters who you are, where you're from, in what city and theater you see it, where in the house you sit, and who you see it with. The show emphasizes identity and material positionality in a way that seems rooted in a pre-digital gay politics consistent with Mac's own generation.

For instance, an acknowledgement of economic reality manifested immediately in the way that audience members who bought rush tickets were escorted from the nosebleed seats at the very back of the balcony to the first two rows on the floor, nonce rows made out of couches and comfortable chairs. And though these folks began each show with some of the best seats in the house, they didn't necessarily keep them as the decades passed and political conditions shifted. Wherever we were seated, we were asked over and over again both to identify ourselves *and* to make ourselves uncomfortable, to allow ourselves to first recognize and then question our positions in relation to the performance itself and the larger picture of American history. And anyway, *Our Lady of Theater's Cruelty* made sure it was impossible to remain comfortable. "This is a radical faerie realness ritual sacrifice," Mac announced with undisguised relish during the show's first decade, "and the audience is the sacrifice!"

Our subsequent sacrifice seemed to come in at least three forms: 1) enduring a twenty-four hour show (or in our case, two twelve-hour shows); 2) being asked to perform tasks while still in the audience, tasks as various as pelting the stage with ping-pong balls, slow-dancing with a same-sex stranger, and sitting blind-folded during an entire decade; 3) being asked to come up on stage to be a part of the show, performing in roles as various as Stephen Foster (who mostly mopes on a stool while enduring a decade of insult) and as Jews in the tenements of turn-of-the-century Brooklyn (who are asked to mime clandestine sex acts). Which of these turned out to be the most onerous aspect of being a sacrifice depended entirely on the identity and position of the individual. And that these sacrifices were strategically and unevenly distributed throughout the theater and across the audience seemed to be the point, part of a critique of privilege and myths of equal access to the American Dream.

Those with the best seats on the floor were the ones most often called onto the stage to perform a role, and even those roles were unequally demanding, burdening each impromptu performer differently. Everyone else was largely left to deal with the duration of the performance and the tasks we were asked to do, some of which involved random intimacies with strangers, such as

attempting to stroke a blindfolded neighbor's face and neck with a carnation while you yourself were blindfolded. But there were also moments, especially during the second twelve decades, when the audience was asked to perform specific tasks because of their identities. All men up to the age of 40 were asked to come onstage and serve as soldiers in the trenches of WWI; white people were asked to leave seats in the center of the theater to emulate white flight, while people of color were asked to move into the seats the new "suburbanites" had left vacant; lesbians were asked to come onstage during the 90s and have a sort of tailgate party replete with beer and vegan hotdogs and Toshi Reagon, who sang before declaiming the Lesbian Avengers' "Dyke Manifesto."

Folks like Sarah seemed to get into their onstage roles. And when Mac asked for people willing to moon the audience, a good-sized chorus line of exhibitionists of all genders clambered onstage and dropped trou on cue whenever Judy sang the word "moon." But there were some folks who clearly experienced such participation as genuinely sacrificial – one middle-aged white man, cast in the role of a lonely curmudgeon at a party, was asked to sit on a bench and read James Joyce's *Ulysses* for the better part of the decade between 1916-1926. He actually left the stage for the audience while Mac sang, and he had to be brought back on stage when it was time for him to be reintegrated into the storyline. For those of us in seats or with identities that shielded us from onstage sacrifice, the show no doubt felt quite different, but Mac did not allow anyone to settle into one seat or feeling for all twenty-four decades. Though folks in the lower balcony were rarely called on stage to perform, from 1906-1916, I was the right gender but not the right age to serve in WWI; from 1946-1956, I was the right race to join white flight; from 1986-1996, I was not the right gender or sexuality to be celebrated as a lesbian. How I felt about these facts depended entirely on who and where and when I am.

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As history passed onstage and we watched America build itself upon a foundation of revolution, indigenous genocide, and slavery, an interesting tension in the show arose between the given and the made, the burdens of history and the queer act of self-creation. I happened to attend the two shows while in the middle of reading two books by the French critic Didier Eribon: his autobiography of growing up white, gay, and working class, *Returning to Reims*, and his theory of gay and lesbian identity, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. This extracurricular reading seemed oddly well-timed, as Eribon's pre-digital identity politics resonated with Mac's, especially when it comes to the idea that queer identity is something self-created and fashioned in response to the lived experience of legal discrimination, societal antagonism, and dearth of queer cultural representation.

Mac returned several times during the twenty-four decade performance to the fact that Judy grew up in the repressive, heteronormative suburb of Stockton, California before glimpsing gay life in San Francisco and then moving to New York and becoming a part of its theater and drag scenes. But "you don't start from scratch when you set out to reformulate what you are," Eribon reminds us in *Returning to Reims*,

It is a slow and painstaking process through which you shape
an identity, starting from the one imposed upon you by the social

order. This is why you never completely free yourself from insult or from shame.

I thought about these sentences each time we watched Machine Dazzle dress Mac, which often involved stripping Judy down to panties before painstakingly assembling another improbable, fabulous costume one layer at a time. I thought about these sentences each time the costume was nearly finished and Judy stepped into a new pair of high heels, especially toward the final decades of each performance when the endurance nature of the night had taken its toll and it was clearly painful for Mac to stand. And I thought about these sentences especially during the show's third decade – we spent 1796-1806 listening to early American drinking songs – when Mac introduced the character of Crazy Jane, a woman castigated by eighteenth century American society for liking to booze it up and have a good time.

In a gesture of solidarity between gender outlaws, Mac likened early America's Crazy Janes to contemporary drag queens, then told an unforgettable, raunchy story that began with a group of New York queens being verbally harassed in a Polish restaurant and ended with the harasser – a straight white man – feeding pierogis to one of the queen's assholes while she was bent over the table. "Crazy Drag Queen can introduce you to your shame," Mac quipped, a remark that made me rethink the visceral pleasure I took in the assemblages Judy wore, which began to seem ever more like a form of radical enchantment, raising queerness to a whole new level of sartorial resistance and extravagant visibility. "There comes a moment when, being spat upon, you turn the spit into roses," Eribon writes in *Returning to Reims*,

You turn the verbal attacks into a garland of flowers, into rays of light. There is, in short, a moment when shame turns into pride. This pride is political through and through because it defies the deepest workings of normality and normativity.

So many of the costumes contained bright reflective fabric and designs suggestive of flowers and foliage, it really was impossible for me not to experience Mac's and Machine Dazzle's brand of drag as insults turned into flowers, spit spun into roses. Maybe this was particularly true because so many of the designs incorporated objects that had obviously been upcycled and given a second life. There was a particularly amusing wig made out of wine corks, a witticism that attained height by emitting a bevy of long thin wires, each tipped by a single cork. There was also an astonishing headpiece featuring two (possibly) taxidermy roosters standing tail-to-tail, each one facing over one of Judy's shoulders like a lookout. Toward the end of the second show there was even an outfit whose headpiece resembled a space helmet disco ball made of compact discs, a silver orb that was later struck by a single ray of light after the theater went utterly dark. It was an auratic and haunting image, and utterly beautiful. Our Lady of Insult. Our Lady of Defiance. Crazy Jane.

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Mac's show might offer itself as a paean to the verb, a ritual sacrifice in honor of creation, but as I've suggested, it does not ignore the literal conditions that simultaneously underlie, enable, and necessitate American acts of self-creation. During the first decade, Mac staged a particularly

poignant example of this, a pointed juxtaposition in a show often marked by poignant, pointed, and surprising juxtapositions. Not long after we worshipped the beatific, beaming Sarah while we spoke in tongues and waved our arms about, Mac paused to acknowledge the fact that the show was taking place on Lenape land, traditional ground of the Delaware tribe displaced by colonization. Judy invited Chuck Gentlemoon DeMund, a Lenape elder and Ceremonial Chief, onto stage, accompanied by cast member Timothy White Eagle (who is of Apache heritage). Then Judy invited DeMund to speak, and he recited a prayer of blessing in Lenape before translating his words for the audience.

Such acknowledgments – of the occupation by settlers of the traditional tribal lands of indigenous peoples – are not uncommon in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where government-funded Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have confronted the public with the too-often-unacknowledged violent legacies of colonization. And though acknowledgments delivered by white people in historically white spaces have also had their share of vocal critics, in the United States we have had no Truth and no Reconciliation, and so Mac's gesture of acknowledgment was particularly poignant, as was the fact of Lenape spoken in the tacitly colonial context of American theater. Because most importantly, Mac did not stop at acknowledgment. Giving the stage over to DeMund introduced another of the Judy's refrains: a lot of our history has either been forgotten, dismissed, or buried, or someone has buried it for us.

The first six decades of the show spoke most directly to the foundational violence of genocide; the next three dealt with abolition, slavery, the failures of white liberals, and the Civil War. But what's so persuasive about Mac's reading of American identity and history is that though it emphasizes revolutionary self-creation, it never does so without acknowledging the foundational violence of such an act, without acknowledging that this violence has in fact never stopped. "When you dream the culture forward," goes one of Judy's essayistic epigrams, "First you have to honor and acknowledge the past. Then you have to honor and acknowledge the present. Then you deconstruct the shit out of it." In the same way that Eribon supposes that all queer identity is built upon a history of insult and shame, so Mac assumes that all American identities are implicitly built upon the mortal insults of indigenous genocide and the slave trade. For "we should note," Eribon insists,

that self-transformation never happens without integration of traces from the past. It preserves the past, simply because that past is the world in which we were socialized and it remains within us to a considerable extent, just as it continues to surround us within the world in which we go on living. Our past is still there in our present. So we remake ourselves, we recreate ourselves (a task that is never finished, always needing to be taken up again), but we do not make ourselves, we do not create ourselves.

Because history ensures that on some fundamental level we do not create ourselves, this is why, in order to "dream the culture forward," Mac began with honoring and acknowledging a past many Americans would rather forget. It is only by doing this work that we can "honor and acknowledge the present" that always already contains echoes of a past whose injustices we might prefer to disavow. And it is only by doing the work of avowing our violent inheritance that

we can then “deconstruct the shit out of it,” and dream a way forward. That’s why the painstaking assembly of each of Mac’s costumes seemed to me to enact this kind of transformative dreaming, but also why it was so important to see each costume slowly discarded, often left in random festive heaps on the stage like baubles on the street after Mardi Gras. Even our most glorious dreams of freedom invariably end, taken apart by time.

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Some art is about making a mess; some art is about making a mess and cleaning it up. I know this is a completely artificial binary, but as a practicing artist, I like to think about it anyway. I know, for instance, that some artists make a mess and try to clean it up, but are actually quite incapable of doing so. And I know some artists can hardly bear to mess up *anything*. Though I myself am partial to my own brand of fastidiousness in execution, I’m attracted to both the process and the spectacle of mess. But I’m probably most moved by work that somehow balances tight execution and messiness, fixed form and aleatory, and Mac has definitely made that kind of work, even if *History*’s durational nature means the performance leaned toward a certain kind of raggedy charm. Indeed, the final decades of each one hundred and twenty years were not unlike 2 AM at the bar, when everyone, under the glare of bright house lights, is a bit unsteady on their feet.

“Perfection is for assholes” is another of Mac’s oft-repeated bon mots, and though it could sometimes read as a kind of punk self-acquittal, it also could read like a conspiratorial admission that let us know that there is nothing perfectible about art, American identity, or the democratic project. And given that Mac reads American identity and history as perpetual cycles of self-creation and decreation, the show itself was bound to emphasize the mess we’ve made instead of outlining strategies to clean it up. In fact, the show made mess pretty literal. We were often given the basic materials with which we could make one and were encouraged to do so. As the initial decades passed and the floor of the theater grew littered with ping-pong balls, torn-up Congressional rosters, red clown noses, broadsides of the proem to Judith Sargent Murray’s eighteenth-century feminist essay “On the Equality of the Sexes,” and bent-stemmed carnations, I began to think about messiness in relation to the show’s title: *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*.

On the surface, it’s a pretty tidy formal conceit. Beginning with 1776, each decade focused on some aspect of or episode from American history; each decade offered a modest, often idiosyncratic archive of songs popular during that time. And there were other structural decisions that underscored these formal conceits. The decade-based costume changes functioned as historical transitions while also emphasizing the pleasures and burdens of constructing and deconstructing a white queer American identity both revolutionary and implicated in violence. And at the end of each decade, Mac’s backup band lost a member, a process of attrition that dramatically winnowed the sound of the Matt Ray’s supple arrangements from chamber orchestra to four-piece rock band to solo singer-songwriter, and left Mac alone on stage during the show’s final decade. Each change in outfit and in backup band corresponded to a change in American identity, a new and different event or epoch. Meanwhile, the action on stage and off paraphrased American history as episodes of destruction, resistance, and rebuilding, episodes whose conflicts all stemmed from the country’s origins.

Which meant that under the surface tidiness of the formal conceit boiled a version of America whose principles are mired in deep, abiding conflict, the drive toward self-determination warring with the drive toward dominating others. “We in this room have a lot of history on our backs,” Mac admitted, “and we’re figuring out what to do with it.” Thus though Mac’s American history – like judy’s American identity – avowed its foundation in genocide and slavery, it was also a fabulous and willful creation. As factual history goes, it was gestural in a manner that was amateurish and queer without apology, a self-consciously agenda-based caricature of history sometimes so perfectly absurd it ascended straight into myth.

For instance, for the decade from 1836-1846, Mac built a miniature boxing ring and staged a battle between Stephen Foster and Walt Whitman, a “smackdown for the title of Father of American Song.” The fight was in spirit rigged from the beginning, as Mac made no secret of judy’s favorite by choosing to play the part of Whitman and by bringing an audience member onstage to play Foster, who looked dejected dressed in a too-small vest and a sad felt hat. But the fight was also literally rigged because the winner had already been crowned: Foster is traditionally hailed as “The Father of American Song.” Historical conclusions forgone, we nonetheless sat through four ingenious, hilarious, and rowdy rounds of the smackdown, ranging from “Wagons vs. Orgies” through “Minstrel Dance vs. Interpretive Dance” to “A Master vs. A Kosmos.”

Mac placed this nineteenth-century decade of smackdown between a decade of abolition and a decade of the Civil War, and allowed brittle, ironized performances of Foster’s racist apologist fantasies of plantation life to fall flat against passionate declamations of Whitman’s queer, full-bodied visions of democratic longing. One of the oddest and most affecting scenes of the entire twenty-four decades unfolded after the smackdown was over and both the audience favorite and the historical winner were announced. A parade of audience members was invited onstage to act out Stephen Foster’s sad demise: alcoholic and destitute, he died after hitting his head on a washbasin in a hotel room on the Bowery. As each proxy Stephen Foster set foot on stage, Timothy White Eagle bonked them on the head with a prop washbasin and they fell in place, a process that was lengthy, deliberately cartoonish, and logistically messy, and completely covered the front of the stage with recumbent bodies. As the lights went down, a spotlight hit Mac’s face framed by an elaborately curled blonde wig, and judy recited an elegiac Walt Whitman poem, the stage transformed into a field of dead Civil War soldiers, a tonal transformation so sudden and utterly appropriate it spooked me into goose bumps.

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In the week between the show’s first twelve decades and its second twelve decades, I thought a lot about “Taylor Mac” the stage character. Though I identified with judy’s politics and sensibility, I didn’t really identify with *judy* per se. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn’t asked to. Most queens have a schtick, a look, and a pathos-driven backstory, and a lot of sophisticated drag is built upon this trinity of sensibility. It’s not that Our Lady of Revolution couldn’t be said to have a schtick, and judy’s looks by Machine Dazzle certainly offered a consistent rococo flamboyance, but judy’s backstory was boilerplate urban gay: born in repressive small town; heads to big city; lives a gay life of art, anonymous sex, and politics. And

Mac never did make much of it, except to suggest it as a sociological given shared by many. Even the twentieth-century decades through which judy lived were not any more marked by personal narrative than those in previous centuries. By the end, it seemed to me that Mac had indeed pulled off the ritual worship of self-creation precisely by avoiding too much elaboration of judy's own identity. The 24-hour show is all about the America that made Taylor Mac. And though it is also all about judy's virtuosic durational performance, it is not really about judy. Why? To make room for *us*. Because America made all of us in the room, too.

Though we were *not* offered a psychological portrait or a character arc, we were offered Mac's positionality. Preferred pronoun: judy. Preferred gender identity: performer. And Mac is not just any kind of performer. judy also has a preferred performance position: stage top. Which made us, by extension, audience bottoms. I like that Mac openly acknowledged the power dynamic involved in a radical faerie ritual sacrifice of the audience. And I like that a large part of Mac's stage character is relational, forged out of the power dynamic between performer and audience, top and bottom. As I've suggested before, the audience was not topped equally – some of us got royally fucked, while others of us were only lightly sodomized – and because so much depended on our individual identities and changing positionalities within the theater, there was no one possible response to being an audience bottom. So Mac's stage character performed both an enactment of the force of society itself and one kind of sensibility formed in response to that force, and alternated between displays of force and displays of response. Mac deflected the burden of psychological reflection onto the audience, who was asked to respond not only to being stage topped but also to the kinds of actions and intimacies we performed.

Mac liked to joke that though some critics have touted the show as a “safe space,” it is anything but. “Someone in here could break your heart,” judy intoned with mock gravitas, “Someone in here could give you an STI. *I* could give you an STI!” And given that the show's cyclical structure of creation and decreation had everything to do with enacting longstanding societal conflicts, it was hard to argue with judy after lustily pelting one's assigned and temporary enemies with ping-pong balls. It was super fun to have enemies you could both see *and* hit with impunity. Once, even more provocatively, judy claimed that “Safe spaces are colonialism.” I had to think about that one. And though the politics of “safe spaces” is clearly not so simple when it comes to women and people of color, Mac's wisecrack performed a withering critique of certain forms of white privilege, a critique paradoxically embodied by the power dynamics of judy's own show. When a white person demands that a social space align with their own ideologies without consent from all who participate in that space, it is a violent exercise of privilege, an extension of colonial power. When a white person demands that a social space align with their own ideologies with tacit consent from all who participate in that space, it is *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*.

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Though Mac was our stage top and the performative center of the show, judy's story did not structure it. OUR stories carried the show, which meant the stories of indigenous peoples, suffragettes, Crazy Janes, missionaries, abolitionists, slaves, soldiers, capitalists, immigrants, Jews, Civil Rights activists, artists, ineffectual white liberals, gays, and lesbians (among many others). Though rooted in Mac's own positionality in American society, judy's analysis of

oppression and injustice was intersectional, and actively acknowledged judy's privilege as a white queer without including any dubious moments of preening self-congratulation. Mac's intersectional politics emphasized moments of acknowledgment, solidarity, and celebration in alternation, and began in the first decade by inviting Chuck Gentlemoon DeMund onto stage and by worshipping audience member Sarah, moments that emphasized judy's commitment to indigenous and feminist politics. Mac's simultaneous acknowledgment of white privilege came in many forms throughout the twenty-four decades, most often in the choice to give the stage over to black women performers at key moments in American history.

For instance, Mac's version of 1926-1936 featured a grand, moving cameo by the Queen of Detroit Blues, Thornetta Davis, whose performance reframed popular music, and the blues in particular, as one of several proffered "techniques to survive poverty-induced depression." And during the decade from 1826-1836, which had a double focus on abolition and on slavery, Mac waged a parodic critique of some white abolitionists as "ineffectual white liberals" akin to contemporary internet activists for whom liking a Facebook post constitutes protest. But when not criticizing ineffectual white liberals, Mac gave the stage over to three dancers from the Brooklyn-based dance company, Urban Bush Women. Company member Love Muwwakkil performed one particularly memorable dance on a pole brought center stage – a sort of pas de deux in which the pole supported Muwwakkil's graceful controlled athleticism as she climbed, spiraled, and sank in centripetal fashion, her movements equally balletic and gymnastic. Gaining a large part of its quiet force through the pole's spatial constraint, the coiled and muscular drama of her performance so engaged me that I entirely forgot about Taylor Mac and can't even recall what judy was doing during Muwwakkil's dance.

To forget about Mac seemed to be the point of such moments. A cynical audience member might suggest the sheer length of the show gave Mac ample room to cede judy's presence to performers of color without decentering judy's performance, and structurally that's indisputably true. But there was one moment early on that allowed the audience insight into Mac's thinking about the white queer performer's intrinsically fraught relationship to racial privilege. Decades 1806-1816 and 1816-1826 (and maybe also 1826-1836 – at some point, I lost track of the decades) were given over to what Mac called "a heteronormative jukebox musical." The story of working class Irish citizens Harry and Jane, the musical follows them as they fall in love in Ireland, part ways as first Harry and then Jane immigrate to the US, and then meet again after becoming swept up in the vicissitudes of American history. Their ridiculous soap opera of a historical narrative focuses first on immigration and later on their relationship to indigenous peoples: reunited, they adopt an orphaned Shawnee girl they name Louisa-Maria before traveling to Georgia as Christian missionaries to the Cherokee, a mission interrupted by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. When Harry and Jane follow the Trail of Tears, Jane dies en route to the Plains, an event that prompts Louisa-Maria to ask: why should we mourn a white woman when thousands of indigenous peoples died during their displacement?

This entire story was related via a monologue that also involved meta-commentary about Mac's (perhaps fictional) attempts to get funding to put this show on Broadway, and was the most extended unbroken fictional narrative in the show. But in the same way that Mac's sensibility intrinsically resists Broadway normativities, Louisa-Maria comes to resist the whiteness of Mac's laughable attempt at a heteronormative mass-market project. Once she enters Mac's

narrative, judy gives a great deal of its focus over to her efforts to resist the assimilation into settler culture her adoptive parents represent. There's a scene during which she "fails" at learning the English alphabet because she believes each letter has a whole world inside it that needs to be explored. And later she "fails" at grieving for her adoptive mother, offering her white father a pointed political question instead. Why? Because of the scale of genocide, it's a loss that cannot be repaired by narrative, a grief that does not "behave" by the rules of settler culture.

Mac really delivered on this point. Louisa-Maria's story ends with a bit of fabulous meta-fiction in which she first refuses the name her missionary parents gave her, rejects her adoptive white father Harry, and then refuses to be narrated anymore by Mac; she vanishes beyond the horizon of an indigenous self-determination not available to a white queer performer. Such a complex meta-gesture could have felt like a tidy intellectual exercise, but instead it revealed the fact that her character had all along been an ineffectual white liberal fantasy, and that even her gestures of resistance were anxious reparations performed to assuage a guilty white liberal conscience. This made the end of her story particularly affecting – and unusually honest. There was both a clear indictment of settler culture in Mac's admission that a white queer performer cannot in fact perform indigenous self-determination, *and* a real ethics in marking the limit of the white imagination's relation to indigeneity. As the character disappeared, the decade ended, and with it the ineffectual white liberal's fantasy that atonement for genocide is possible: acknowledgment is not enough.

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I want to end these notes by returning to Mac's admission that "We in this room have a lot of history on our backs, and we're figuring out what to do with it." This seems to me to be judy's way of saying that the show itself embodies the work of figuring out what to do with history, but also that such work is best done collectively, as a more-or-less intentional *we*. This suggestion makes me return to Mac's oft-posed rhetorical question: "How do we build ourselves when we are being torn apart?" Each time Mac returned to it during the show, judy posed this question in the first-person plural, which suggested that any answer would also hinge upon *us*, upon how we define ourselves in relation to others. Because every American identity is founded on injury – the historical and ongoing injury of others as well as of ourselves – every self-created American identity is also always already relational. Mac's show reminds us of this, and draws upon a long legacy of leftist politics to suggest that open acknowledgment of our shared history of unequally distributed injury offers the beginning of solidarity and the possibility of coalition.

This is obviously not a utopic politics, it is an aspirational one, and Mac acknowledged that such aspiration is hard work – and always incomplete. It was crucial to the show's politics that Mac narrated many cycles of building and tearing apart and rebuilding, the way Jim Crow and white flight preceded the Civil-Rights-era March on Washington which preceded the Stonewall Uprising and Gay Liberation. It was crucial to the show's politics that Mac, a white queer performer, gave shout-outs to Civil Rights-era theorist and activist Bayard Rustin, as well as Stonewall rioters and trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. These shout-outs acknowledged the difficult ground-level activist work done by queer people of color, work that has so often been deliberately forgotten and buried by those in power. But as I've said before, Mac's politics are rooted in a pre-digital history of coalitional organizing and direct action, a

politics consistent with Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, and ACT UP. The show returned us to this politics, but did so without making it a nostalgic fantasy – this politics was instead offered as a challenge to ineffectual white liberalism.

Often ceding the stage to others, the show deliberately modeled and celebrated communities built around shared identities and values put it action. During the entire twenty-four decades, a band of Dandy Minions helped stage-manage and facilitate audience participation. Led by their Artistic Director Timothy White Eagle, the Minions were part crew and part burlesque show, and their joyful provocations often drew our attention away from the stage and into the audience. Multiracial and of many genders and body types, the Minions offered sex-positivity through their costumes (or lack of them) and performances. During the second show, for instance, Minion and burlesque choreographer Tigger! took over the stage with an exquisite solo fan dance performed both naked and without fans, another of those moments when I forgot about Taylor Mac entirely. And while the Minions offered themselves up as a kind of Sexual Liberation coalition, another act Mac invited to take the stage was rooted in a local black community: the drill team Camden Sophisticated Sisters/Distinguished Brothers performed to the beat of The Almighty Sound Percussion Drumline. And another dance troupe that took over the stage – the all-female aerialist performers Tangle Movement Arts – was rooted in a gender-based community. And all the while the audience was asked again and again to convene, disband, and reconvene in different identity-based groups: as soldiers, as white people, as Walt Whitman fans, as lesbians, as people of color. That the show enacted the historical and societal forces whose pressures initiate ever-shifting attachments to communities based on aspects of our identities was part of the point.

From its earliest decades, Mac's show offered the possibility of solidarity arising out of one's own American identity, whatever it might be, a politics grounded in acknowledgment of injury, but embodied in actions undertaken together as well as in ceding the stage to others. And though all of this sounds very serious, Judy's aspirational, often improvisatory version of coalitional politics appropriately ricocheted in tone from festive to funereal, ribald to self-righteous, anguished to angry. Addressing the root necessity of this kind of politics, as well as a kind of revolutionary continuity, during the show's opening decade Mac laid out Judy's hilarious, insightful version of America's founding principles:

Hating congress
Misinterpretation of common sense
Pining for a faraway place
Making things
Loving black hair
Dandy revenge

Though my notes weren't able to touch upon each of these foundational principles, I'd like to end with "Dandy revenge," an idea rooted in the political origins of the song "Yankee Doodle Dandy." As Mac told it, the song was sung by the British military in pre-Revolutionary years in order to mock the ineffectual Yankee troops, but it was later appropriated by the Yankees, who added verses and sung it as a form of revenge, a Revolutionary taunt. Mac made much of the fact that the British version of the song hinges on an insult, and not only that, but a misogynist and homophobic one that figured early America as collectively queer, one mass Dandy. Mac made

even more of the fact that the dandiacal Yankees later owned the insult, sewing the song so effectively into the self-created image of the nation that its pejorative origins all but disappeared.

This story of “dandy revenge” seemed to me a miniature allegory for Mac’s own show, a recognition that though injury is the origin of identity, it is also the origin of revolution. Susan Sontag once quipped that “Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.” But dear Susan Sontag: we Dandies have always had bigger problems than that. Mac reminded us that the Dandy has always been both an aesthetic and a political figure, one who might say the problem facing Dandies today is “how to be a dandy in the age of mass incarceration.” The question is supposed to be uncomfortable! In the original song, the Dandy pretends a mere feather in his cap is high fashion, a laughable fantasy Revenging Dandies collectively appropriate, a Revolutionary feather with which they feather their own caps. Repurposing the questionable gesture, Revenging Dandies spin insult into adornment, spit into roses, and shame into pride, embodying a politics that both critiques normative values and defies the powers that be. And though we don’t have to ask anyone for permission to create our own survival, *History* reminds us we can only create it together.