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M A G A Z I N E

Jeremy Xido

The broken story and the punchbag.

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The public rehearsal for the third part of Jeremy Xido's series *The Angola Project Trilogy* takes place in a white room in Manhattan with a twenty-storey view over Wall Street. It's largely empty but for a punchbag and a single chair, and the walls are plastered with images and handwritten notes.

One states in large print, "I am totally, utterly heartbroken." Beside it, scans of the brain, and notes on how locating emotion in the body helps us to deal with psychological pain. Another cluster focuses on *chÅ/d*, a Tibetan Buddhist practice of externalising demons through rituals in fearful places. "The opposite of exorcism," Xido has written. Across the room are world maps; notes on 9/11; a quotation that reads, "Self is like a knotted fist: when you open the hand to give, there's no more fist – no more self."

Xido has invited us here to eat, and, handing out red velvet cupcakes and raspberry cheesecake, he begins by explaining that, during the last few weeks, his dramaturg Igor Dobricic, too enamored with New York to be stuck in the studio all morning, would drop by at two o'clock every day with desserts and sympathy for Jeremy's recent heartbreak. "Igor would arrive with cake, and I would be lying in a corner somewhere, crying."

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The pair avoided developing text; Dobrocic insisted on presenting Xido as he was, free from any fiction or narrative to sublimate what he was experiencing. With a doubly broken heart (Xido had had a heart attack two years earlier), and in the “broken heart” of Wall Street – a stone’s throw from Ground Zero – the collaborators found themselves battling with a “broken story”: a performance piece that set out to fail from the first.

The rehearsal, then, presented us not with a narrative, but with a practice – a ritual that Xido would undertake daily in his empty studio. He changes into fluorescent pink Thai boxing shorts with roses and the word “Love” emblazoned on them, and binds his hands into gloves. And then, instructed by an automated computer software which alternately shouts at him and blasts pop-rock anthems from the seventies, he approaches the punchbag.

If recounting exactly what followed seems a little unfair on Xido’s future audiences, rest assured that an insight into the process is just as (if not more) enlightening. Work on the trilogy began in Lisbon, where Xido had received funding to create a performance piece on the theme of immigration. He was immediately struck by the Angolan presence in the city, which to him felt old, embedded, “somehow original to the fabric of the city. [Lisbon] was indebted to this presence in a way that was different to other cosmopolitan centres.”

Having himself grown up in Detroit, Xido (a Spanish spelling of a Hungarian name) describes his ethnicity as “Trannsylvaniaian”. He tells me that he was the “only white kid in the nieghbourhood” – that he knew no other white people until the age of twelve, “aside from my immediate family, and people in the media.” The conventional North American dynamics of the minority were fundamentally subverted, and as such, “I’ve always found myself more comfortable with people who have mixed, complex identities.”

He cites Vijay Prashad’s ‘polyculturalism’, an affinity which resurfaces throughout his work. His interest in Chinese construction workers in Angola, the Vietnamese gay scene in Lisbon and – in all of this – the importance of Buddhist martial arts, is reminiscent of Prashad’s insistence on the inter-relatedness of cultures perceived as “other” by imperialism. I wonder if his enthusiasm for seventies disco isn’t also something to do with the title of Prashad’s book, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.

Xido’s own trajectory within this polycultural network is emphatically personal. The piece “continually went back to my own adventure – my own body through space and time.” Shying away from generalisations about places and people he was only just encountering, his own story “was all that I had. I couldn’t write a story about Lisbon – I could only write a story about me arriving in Lisbon. My identity within it was essential, because it was about the interface, and my set of assumptions.”

Moreover, there was something healing in recognising the ethnic diversity in his own self-portrait. “The entire transatlantic slave trade keeps going through history and landing in my neighbourhood in Detroit, with me and my best friend growing up. I am this story – this story is me, in some weird way. Accepting and expressing that is hugely therapeutic for me.”

Ten years spent living and travelling in Europe and Africa allowed Xido to gather material for the trilogy, often in unorthodox ways. Researching Chinese railway builders in Angola, he was forced to approach anyone who looked Asian – “it was really just inappropriate “ And yet he found connections. “I would do a [Kung Fu] form they would recognise, and then suddenly I would be drinking with them in a compound and playing cards.” Despite his claim to have now returned “home” to the US, there’s something about the nomad that lingers.

Recounting the adventure with a smile, Xido is nonetheless wary of his own role in relating such information as a performer and storyteller; is more concerned with “the failure of story to adequately address the issues we’re facing.” He bemoans the influence of financial stakes in film-making, and the tendency in the arts to “commodify people’s lives in a way that may have nothing to do with how they actually are, but has to do with the marketplace. Whatever story is sold is the story you can sell.”

As a performance maker, then, he finds himself in a double bind, feeling the pressure to entertain whilst at the same time to deliberately enact the failure of narrative – either verbal or choreographic. He is refreshingly frank about the expectations of the art world, and sees himself in the tradition of Scheherazade – defending himself as an artist through his stories. It was a fight he came up against in proving himself to the financial backers of the work: “They didn’t trust me – with good reason.”

“If I could tell [the story of the place] well enough, if I could make it entertaining, if I could make it have meaning in a way that had value to arts institutions around Europe, then I justified my existence and the existence of the work. Storytelling was, in and of itself, a defense.”

This third section, however, subverts the kind of expectations typically associated with liveness and art. Swapping the notion of a rehearsed, one-off performance for a physical practice Xido repeats daily, swapping text for muttered improvisation, it attempts to negate or refuse the performative product even as it is created. Xido is not blind to the paradox. “Am I attempting to transform that *refusal* into something of value? It’s sucked back into the system that re-establishes the value: it’s a constantly losing proposition. The only thing I can do is drop my guard – drop it! – drop my attempt to control how it’s perceived”¹ Which will never happen.”

Despite his evident frustration, the performance space is for Xido a refuge of sorts: a site which delights in the slipperiness of information, rather than the steadfastness of authenticity – ethnic or otherwise. The white room loaned to him by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council is darkening. Office hours are over, and Wall Street has been given up to the last stragglers from the Zuccotti Park occupation, huddled in sleeping bags under the shelter of scaffolding.

I ask Xido about the studio itself. “Performance space, for me, is about a meditative moment of presence, of *now*. You can create that in different contexts, but that’s the essence. That’s the place I feel most comfortable in, because I’m not negotiating stories all the time. There’s a fundamental acceptance that it’s a fabrication; that it can shift and move. More, that the dexterity with which you are able to move is *valued*, and in fact allows for a recognition of truth.”

The Angola Project by Jeremy Xido/Cabula6 is on at [New Dance Amsterdam](#) between 7th and 17th November.