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A NAKED PUERTO RICAN FAGGOT FROM AMERICA: AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ARTHUR AVILÉS

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# 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 in specialized dance publications. His work often focuses on the experiences of lesbian, gay, and transgender Nuyorican and New York-Rican individuals. He humorously (and critically) approaches queer diasporic Boricua life in the ghetto by rewriting classic popular tales such as *Cinderella* and *The Wizard of Oz*, which go on to become pieces like *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 giving provocative titles to his works, such as *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America* (1996). Avilés 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 matriarch Maéva while he plays Arturo, the favorite gay son, and other dancers portray "stereotypical" stock characters such as "Blanquita" (a light-skinned daughter) and "Trigueña" (a dark-skinned one).



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

**A**vilés founded his own dance company, the Arthur Avilés Typical Theatre (<http://www.arthuravilestypicaltheatre.org/>), in 1996, and together with his 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, his ideas about homosexuality, his use of female drag and nudity in his performances (and the controversies this has entailed), and his experiences as a go-go dancer, including incarceration. The interview also briefly touches on Avilés’s relationship with the renowned African American dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones.



## The origins of Avilés's dance career

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

**Arthur Avilés (AA):** Yes, in '83. I had some classes in high school, but I hated dance 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 movement?

**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 that 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 Bill T. 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 bit 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 go-go dancers, all on stage at the same time. It's a juxtaposition of three different kinds of dance 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 [1998].

**LL:** One of the most distinguishing features of your work has been your long-standing 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-Rican's Ensalada* [1990], and it was about me discovering or rediscovering my culture again, because I had been away from it for a long time. So I asked Elizabeth, "What are all the stereotypical attributes to being Puerto Rican?" We made this whole list out 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 they 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 challenge 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 orchestrator 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 in 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?

**AA:** That was in '91. That was the first time I stole a piece. It was by Bill T. Jones, a piece that he called *Truisms* [*Holzer Duet... Truisms*, 1985], based on Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*. Bill originally did it for Lawrence Goldhuber, who is a big 250-pound man who Bill wanted to look small against. I replaced Lawrence Goldhuber with

Elizabeth Marrero, and Bill T. Jones with Arthur Avilés, and we saw that little 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 the book 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 cause 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've 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 a 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 Charles [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.

LL: Around that time, you made *Untitled* with music by Dolly Parton [1994], which then became part of *Arturo es el muñeco de Maéva* [1994]?

AA: I made *Untitled* first, and then I turned it into a duet for Morgan Keller, for *Blanquita es la muñeca de Maéva*. So it went from *Untitled*, which was a piece

about myself and my breaking up with Bill, to that. Whether the audience knew that or not doesn't matter to me, because I think what they got was this kind of quirky guy dancing to Dolly Parton and saying good-bye. And then I turned it into this piece about a Puerto Rican matriarch, Elizabeth [Maéva], in that big dress, with Morgan [Blanquita], her child, and that relationship that they have as a little "white girl child" 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 then 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 there's a little bit of a rumble in the relationship, and that her son or her daughter is going to have to leave her. Then I do this little dance, and the piece ends with me kind of flying off.

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 because at a certain moment, you asked the audience "What are you laughing at?" Do you recall this?

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 the way I did. I agree with her there. You know, my ego was in the way. It was super-high for some stupid reason. I was stupid to do that.

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

AA: I think it's been great. I think people have received me really well. And that's one of the reasons why I felt bad for my reaction. I have to see what that was about, because I'm in a different place in my life. If my reaction was called for, then, I will back it up. But why can't I do that, you know? If I felt that they were being mean to me, why can't I take a self-defensive position?



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 dance completely nude with no music. What inspired you to choreograph this piece?

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 think is all pedestrianism; take away stop. If you take away all of those things, you come 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 it, 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 theatrical, it has a lot of theatrical elements, although always based in dance. So I went away and thought, “OK, I’ll take that challenge. I’ll do a dance piece that is just about the concept of dance, about movement.” So like I said, I removed the costumes, there was no lighting, no form of theatricality or pedestrian gesture or anything like that, i.e. walking, no theatricality, i.e., turning my head in order to respond to something, like if you heard a noise in the distance, and you turned your head to respond to it, the audience, that’s a theatrical gesture. Rather than, if you were a real stickler about it, the concept of movement for movement’s sake.



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 listen to, as in if you were to do a movement and you would go "haaaaa" [exhales loudly]. 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 strips the 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 know 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 are conceptualized in Hispanic families. And then when you changed it to *Arturo es el muñeco de Maéva*, 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-haired, 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 flowing, 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 moving in space continuously, for 15 minutes. That was important too. I asked the guy who was doing the lights to bring the light slowly up at the very beginning and then after 15 minutes to bring them slowly down.

LL: So that's why when the lights go down you're still dancing?

AA: Right, and when the lights come up I'm already involved in the act of dancing. So you never saw me begin.

***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 America*?

**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 feeling.

**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 true 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 we 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 reason for me to play with the ramifications, you know what I mean? So I will advertise it, 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. 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 body is about sex and sexuality these days. I think that as a gay man, it is a part of how I define myself, through my sexuality. I am 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 or 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. Those fairy tales can get pretty vicious. That's why at the very end I put in that scene where they're chopping Arturella up, and the arm falls off on stage and there's blood coming out of it. That's my memory of what I was told fairy tales do. They go to these really gruesome places.

**LL:** You start out *Arturella* talking about the Bronx and the gangs and the knives.

AA: Right, from the *gangas* and the knives. But otherwise it's straight from Disney, the whole structure of it. Literally, even when we learned the movements from the birds flying, like a bird flew from the lamppost to the bed, we would make 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 sings 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 prince's *quinceañero* begins, and you appear in the palace and then you finally meet him and then you dance. I wanted to ask you, in *Arturella* the gayness of the piece is brought out by your drag, you're initially dressed up as the 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 you going to the prince'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 not 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 is wearing a dress so people automatically assume that he's gay. For what reason I don't 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 ball scene? What was your motivation? And what is the dancing in that section about?

AA: OK, so the music. I was working in a club as a lap dancer, you know, a go-go 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 in my life. And that was while I was making *Arturella*, actually. A guy who was working with me, my manager, had a tape of a new group called Acid and it was a retro group that hearkened back to the pure disco era, with that pure beat, bip, bip, bip, bip, and they went from there. I heard this piece of music, “The World Turns Round and Round.” You know, it's just a basic fact, that's what the world does. For some reason, I felt it was the appropriate piece for the ball scene, because it was driving and I thought it was really current, this group with retro seventies kind of disco sound.

The 70s are so “in” right now, or even at that time, that was in ‘96. And then I 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 bent to it. 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 form], 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. I was 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 Rican people 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 gave him free reign, he could do whatever he wanted on top of that score. And here we are dancing and then Jorge says “It’s like the [danza]” and I was like “Wow!” He turned 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, there’s a 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 Jorge’s eyes. Really, it was his eyes I was looking at all of this through, because I wanted 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 strength of your sexuality is put right up front. I don’t see them as so different. The only difference is the way you perform on this stage and the way you perform on that 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 happens 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 this one part of the dance where I pointed my feet. [Laughs again.] You know, I mean, you just don’t point your feet, you don’t do that in go-go dancing, it’s just not what it’s about. When I did that, Joey looked over and he started to laugh because he thought, “Why is he doing that? This is completely out of place. He should be gyrating his hips a little bit more.” You know?

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 you 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, but you know, if you take a look at the best go-go dancers, they are phenomenal in the way they can get you to get an erection. That person is no so far removed from the concert dancer, who can do that also at a certain point. And so, there I was, this concert dancer, I was gyrating and doing that stuff, but when he pointed at my feet, he was like "Oh, look, twinkle toes!" [Laughs.] I realized, "Oh, shit," it was the wrong move in the wrong context. As it might be, you know, as some phenomenally gyrating sexual move on the concert stage would be the wrong move in that context. Now, does that mean you do it or you don't do it? You have a choice. If you say, "Oh, yeah, 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 showing them that you have *line* or *extension*. They don't care about that!

LL: This is really interesting because I was trying to think about your dancing naked in *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America*, and I was thinking that really the only other 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 thing.

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

LL: For me, it's really interesting to know that in fact you *have* crossed, you have 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 daring off, in what it is that I can do on the stage.

LL: Because so far, most recently, people aren't arrested on the concert stage, but 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 so sure that it's so different within the last twenty years. Maybe it is. Maybe it's more 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 jazz players standing outside of a club smoking pot, they get handcuffed and hit by the police. And this is happening down in the [West] Village and in the East Village. It's a little extreme, I think.

LL: So, Arthur, when you decided to dance at the go-go clubs, was it predominantly a financial consideration?

AA: Completely! [He laughs.] Well, I say "completely," in addition to the fact that I was interested. When I saw those go-go dancers, all I could think of was, "I could



do that!" But you know, when I got up there and I started to do it, the rules 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 men 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, what's wild about that is I had no idea that *Maéva de Oz* was theater, but the whole thing is spoken! Elizabeth does all the parts [Dorothy/Maéva, three farmhands, the aunt and uncle, 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, 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 woman. 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, this is a lesbian girl who's always complaining and really angry at the world. And then this 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 onto the screen [in the background], she has a new gown on, even Arturoto [the dog Toto, performed by Avilés] turns a different color, he is golden now and the closet is taken 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 *homosexual*... She goes through every word that you can speak of in English and in Spanish that are in relation to a lesbian woman and she realizes this is who she is. She says, "Oh, I thought dykes were all ugly... Oh, no, that's only if they're bad dykes." So it's 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 cause she's "super" now [Super Maéva], you know, she's powerful. And then the little boy lifts her up and she goes flying out like Superman. That's *Maéva de Oz*, just a little girl coming out of the closet realizing that she's a lesbian. But she's a Latina girl, of course, 'cause she has a thick accent and she speaks in Spanglish and in English and in Spanish.

LL: Was *The Wiz* an inspiration for this piece?

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 of those 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 Nuyorican/New York-Rican rendition.

AA: Right, that's what it is. I like taking classic stories like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Cinderella*, the classic scaffolding of stories, and testing them—do they work on a gay Latino agenda? Do they work here? It's a question. And I think so far these two have. I mean we can go into it, continue to go down the line, say gay, Latino, working-class. 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 and we go from the yellow brick road to the wizard. And I play all the characters: the tin man, 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 or 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 of 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 fun, 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, so I'm going crazy in a sense. And then realizing that at one point, and that's when the wizard comes in, at the very end, he says "Who are you? Who are you? Now go! Go! Go! Open! Open! Open!" [Singing, Avilés's pitch gets higher with each "open!"] It's about opening. "Who are you? Go! Go forward." You know? And realizing that all these things: the big 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 you can

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

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

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 cunning, and where it is we want to be stupid. We *make* those decisions. We're not just stupid. And that's where I speak from a very working-class, actually, a very poor-class situation, where you feel like shit all the time. And through social therapy, I feel very empowered. I feel as if, "Oh shit, I could love, and I could hate,

and I could feel stupid and I could feel smart whenever I want to, not whenever *it* takes over *me*.” So what happens is, I get one arm, and that one arm, it’s a scarecrow; one arm is a tin man; a tail, that’s the lion; the hat, that’s the witch; another hat, that’s Glinda; and then the big head, the big disco ball, that’s the Wizard. And at one point all of those things are on me. And then at another point I take them off myself. Actually, they get put on me and then at the very end of the piece I take them off and I place 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 quite understand 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 and love is my left arm. 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 that piece, because it’s so campy! You know, it comes from such a campy place and I think 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. Aha, here we come back to the concept of drag, is it an indication that someone is gay or not? 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 do *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 here 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 kabuki theater as a person or an entity that changes things. Like if the main character needs 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.

Charles plays the kuroko, but we changed the concept of kuroko a little bit. In *Arturella* there were kurokos, they were like the classic form of kurokos, whereas in *Dorothur’s Journey*, we changed it and turned Charles into, you know Linc in *The Mod Squad*?

He has a big afro and a long-sleeve tight shirt, with tight spandex shorts, like hot shorts,

and he has these pumps, black suede pumps. And he comes in and out of the scene. He's the one that gives me my scarecrow arm, my tin-man arm, he's the one who puts the witches' hats on me. And then by the very end, because he's this force that's put onto the piece, I touch him, and look him in the eye. He's like the concept of choice, and we see each other and then we kind of acknowledge each other. In other words, I acknowledge my choice. So, towards the end of the piece he dances with Elizabeth and me. So we become this threesome: she's my companion right next to me and he is 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 the very end we do the John Travolta pose from the poster of *Saturday Night Fever*. And you know, that pose is actually quite beautiful, because it points up to the sky and down to the ground. It says "Go fly!" and "Stay grounded!" at the same time. Funny, it came from the seventies and everyone thinks that it is really superficial but if you look into some things—and I don't want to take it too seriously—it's about keeping your chin up high. And that's important to poor-class and working-class people. That's the way it ends: first with *Charlie's Angels*, and then with another popular iconic thing that is a little more universal in my eyes, the concept of pointing up and down and being grounded. I know it's disco... [laughs] and we do the bump in it, we do a little bit of a concept from the seventies called contact improvisation. We don't do contact improvisation but this little concept inside of it was born from that. What else do we do? We do the wave, and then we do voguing, which is eighties, really, so we 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 relationship to disco, or social dance movement that has a relationship to disco.



*Elizabeth Marrero and Arthur Avilés.  
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