

Putting Popular Culture to Work: Monsters and Ghosts in *Blasphemies on Forever*

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I wish I had been there. I left the hotel with plenty of time to get to the space. I wandered down Michigan Ave. with Patty, my conference roommate of fifteen years, looking forward to the performance. I've known Dusty since he was an undergrad. He performed in my fourth show, my first as a professor. We had been to "The Mountain" Performance Artist Retreat together, talked about our work, spent valuable time communing as artists/scholars/friends. I was excited to see his new project. But Patty and I, bundled up in the Chicago night, couldn't find the venue. I thought I knew where it was. I was wrong. The clock ticked. We shivered. We paced up and down the sidewalk, circling back, frustrated, growing angry, desperately seeking the performance. I'm usually prompt. I usually plop myself in the front rows, enthusiastic, a true believer in the congregation of live performance. We couldn't find the venue. I felt like an idiot. Damn! I wish I had been there.

(paraphrased conversation from memory)

Dusty: Tracy, would you be interested in responding to my show *Blasphemies on Forever: Remembering Queer Futures*?

Tracy: Dusty, you remember I didn't see it? We got lost that night.

Dusty: I can send you a link to the show and you can watch it on your computer. I think having someone who didn't see it live would be interesting. My other reviewers saw it live.

Tracy: Thanks for reminding me . . . Dusty, I'm familiar with queer theory, but it's not what I do. Do you really think I'm the right person for the job?

Dusty: You'd provide a different perspective. You saw the beginnings of it at The Mountain. It's filled with references to popular culture. I think you're a great match. And besides, if it's accepted, most of the people watching it and reading the reviews will be like you; they will be experiencing it on a computer.

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Tracy: Okay. If you think I can bring something to the discussion, and I can certainly speak to the importance of documenting live performance in this way.

Dusty: Thanks. I'm excited to see what you'll do with Freddy Krueger.

Tracy: Did you say Freddy Krueger? I'm all over it!

(procrastination)

Videos of live performance are notoriously BAD. Dan Heaton, responding to the video of my show *Busted Flat in Baton Rouge* in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, has fun with a pun and calls it FLAT. And it is; let's be honest. A video documentation of a live event eschews all the senses except sight and sound, and even those are rendered in two dimensions rather than three. Knowing all this, I still want performance artists to document their work in some way. Like RoseLee Goldberg, I want an archive of the impact of performance on art and everyday life. I have documented every show I've ever done (except one) with video, and I miss that one terribly. I don't look at the videos as works of art, but rather partial reminders of a thing passed. Although a video can't capture the way the room felt when the actual performance took place—its energies, temperature, smells, etc.—it can remind me of things I might have forgotten or even help me see certain things anew. But if I was never there in the first place, I have extra work to do. A video asks me to draw upon my phenomenological experience of sitting in a live performance. It asks me to pay attention to the audience present. Do I interpret their stillness as being enrapt? Do I interpret their movement as discomfort (certainly a sensation we performance artists might want to create) or boredom? And what about the laughter? Is it obligatory or are the writing and timing sharp? Has the performer created a genuine connection? A video demands I pay close attention to details I take for granted when I happily sit in the front rows.

And the result of all this is procrastination. I don't want to watch the video. You might not want to either. But you should watch it. Trust me. Like the candy bucket on top of my refrigerator, it's filled with sweet and sour surprises.

(first viewing)

Oh, what a burdensome title! The first thing I'll say is he should just call it *Blasphemies on Forever*. The subtitle makes it sound like an academic paper. I hope it's not going to be like an academic paper. We expect so much of ourselves as artist/scholars and/or scholar/artists. Those of us who trace our work to an academic history feel called to create aesthetic communication with an emphasis on communication. But the aesthetic matters. Ask any random person in the audience. Go ahead and create a powerful cultural critique. Communicate a message, but try to make it pretty. Try to give it some magic.

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It's filled with magic! It's not like an academic paper at all, or at least any typical academic paper. It's a compilation: montages, movement, metaphors, scenes, songs, short films, narrative, homages, critical moments, audience interaction, visual images. It's a skilled mashup that relies heavily on references to popular culture, particularly the popular culture of the 80s and the 90s. And like Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky) says, I enjoy identifying all the citations. It's a virtual memory goldmine. In fact, I'm startled by the commonality of our popular culture vocabulary. Dusty's a little younger, but not by much, and as Emily Valentine (a *90210* villain) and "Cool Rider" (a song in the film *Grease 2*) make appearances, I realize that their own narratives weave effortlessly into my interpretation of the overall performance. He has put popular culture to work. Yet, I wonder for whom? If Dusty and I are comrades in popular culture, and I find myself lost in some of the references, knowing there's more to know, a narrative out there somewhere that might make more meaning, what of the audience purposefully unplugged from the now (or the then)? I look to see if there's something for them.

The performance is filled with stories: Dusty going to gay bars, Dusty trying to learn about his grandfather, Dusty's date to a graveyard birthday party, a fairytale about a ravenous dinosaur, and a Facebook message from a childhood friend. The stories are woven together with references to other stories (the films of Julia Roberts, familiar sitcoms, horror movies, film noir) and songs (songs about "Horny Grandfathers" and "Straight-Acting Gays") and scenes (a younger Dusty's visit to a psychiatrist, Dusty as a creative child playing in his room, Dusty cruising Death). And if the above description seems too "talky" for you, powerful movement pieces emerge throughout: Dusty and his partner Jason's (it's the first time I've mentioned him, but it won't be the last) fluid dance in front of a slick montage, an absurd masked and seemingly "naked" cabaret to the Mr. Belvedere theme song, Dusty gorging on chicken wings, the Buffalo sauce staining his lips and face. At first, the assortment of approaches may overwhelm. Make no mistake; the performance is a wild ride. Yet, Dusty's sharp mind, his immense skill, his talent, and his expertise in personal narrative, popular culture, and performance always move toward purpose. You might say there's something for everyone.

If you pay attention on first viewing, *Blasphemies* is a classic coming-of-age tale, the story of a young man (the protagonist) on a journey to find meaning, which he discovers gradually and with much difficulty. Society (or popular culture, in the case of *Blasphemies*) functions as primary antagonist. Its symbols and narratives impede Dusty's progress by excluding him, as an aging gay man, in representations of "happily ever after." As he tries to make his way, a deluge of literal and figurative obstacles deny his passage, all the while making him wiser.

(on second thought)

According to horror scholars like David Skal and Joseph Maddrey, the monster stands as a metaphor for the fears and obsessions of a culture in a particular historical moment. Dracula represents a fear of the European other. Frankenstein's monster represents a fear of science. King Kong represents a fear of the primordial world. Rosemary's Baby represents a fear of losing control of one's body to others (a very real fear indeed). The zombie represents a fear of . . . well, you get my point. Goltz introduces us to multiple monsters in the first couple minutes of *Blasphemies*, and those monsters maintain a prominent role throughout. It's our task to figure out why. What do Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Nosferatu, and Mommy Dearest have in common besides being monsters?

First, Goltz's monsters threaten youth from the outside in. They prey on the young. Some monsters, like Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, prey on one family. Some monsters, like Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, prey on entire communities. Some monsters, like Tim Burton's aliens in *Mars Attacks*, prey on the world. But all of Goltz's monsters destroy innocence in some way. Freddy Krueger stalks the children of Springwood, Ohio. Jason Voorhees slashes the hormonal counselors of Camp Crystal Lake. Nosferatu longs to feast on the blood of the pure at heart. The aging Mommy Dearest abuses the daughter she sees as eventual competition.

Second, all of Goltz's monsters threaten youth from the inside out. They look decrepit. They rot, crumble, and disintegrate in front of our very eyes. *Mommy Dearest* begins with a desperate, even violent, beauty ritual to stave off the effects of aging. Freddy, famously scarred by fire, manipulates his appearance in grotesque ways to terrify his victims. Jason hides his mutilated face with the iconic hockey mask, and Nosferatu, with his frightening rat-like visage, symbolizes plague and sleeps in a coffin filled with dirt. These monsters function as opposites of youth (and the beauty associated with it).

In *Blasphemies*, Goltz, as an aging gay man, makes a clear comparison between two possible futures to remember: one, as the sidekick, the best man, the supporting role in someone else's story; and two, as a monster, an old man preying on youth, someone to fear and someone to fear becoming. Of course, neither of these narratives satisfies Goltz, so he struggles to create a new future to remember.

The significance of this thesis is that I had not realized this seeming lack-of-a-satisfactory-narrative-for-the-aging-gay-man prior to considering *Blasphemies*. Yes, I realized that the gay man was often portrayed as the white woman's best friend in sitcoms and film. Yes, I saw representations of the asexual (possibly gay, but never confirmed) older single man in mainstream media. Yes, I know some monsters are pedophiles, but in my privilege, I failed to see the connections. Goltz's portrayal of this particular kind of monster in *Blasphemies* communicates his cultures' (gay and

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broader popular culture) fears and obsessions. He fears moving into a future that would cast him this way. Might we say he is obsessed with the (im)possibility? *Blasphemies* reveals gay culture's obsession with youth via popular culture's obsession with youth, heteronormativity's marginalization of queer sexuality, and the perceived threat of a mature queer sexuality that would turn everything "we" think "we" know on its ear. Of course, I am speaking beyond my comfort zone. My analysis, however clumsy, acknowledges that the *type* of monster matters. If such is the case, we must address the ghost.

My first instinct was to consider monsters generally and *ignore* the ghost. In fact, some scholars, like Steven Schneider, place the ghost in a complex typology of all conceptual monsters. The ghost is a subgenre of monster: reincarnated rather than psychic, spirit rather than zombie, disembodied rather than embodied. However, the categorical nitpicking of this kind of scholarly labor ignores the ghost's palpable presence/absence in *Blasphemies*. In *Blasphemies*, the ghost resists being a monster. It resists being a subgenre. It yearns to be something altogether (should I say it?) different. The ghost refuses to be ignored.

Let's be clear. I don't want to talk about ghosts and discussions of hauntology with the growing numbers of hipsters in the blogosphere. I want to talk about Jason as cast as "the ghost" in this performance. Sure, Derridean ghosts haunt my reading of him, but I am interested in specifics. How does he haunt? What does his presence/absence communicate? How is he different from the other monsters in the performance? I know my analysis will always already be incomplete. Ghosts haunt each of us uniquely. Haunting is tricky terrain that resists closure. However, my primary thought from first viewing until holding my breath and diving into the depths of analysis was, "I need to talk about Jason." I imagine many of you want to talk about him as well, but there may be others who were/are actually able to *ignore* him. There may be others who see this performance as a solo endeavor.

The ambiguity of the ghost is invitational. The ghost beckons interpretation, and therefore, engaged relationship. From the beginning of *Blasphemies*, Jason haunts the performance, disrupting the self-presence of Dusty. The performance is only possible with Jason's assistance. He dances with Dusty. He delivers props to Dusty. He performs with Dusty in live and mediatized scenes. At one point, a stage light hits him and flashes his shadow on the video screen. We watch him watching Dusty from the side of the stage (clever editing by Dusty). Yet, Jason is never fully present in the way we imagine Dusty is, but he is never fully absent either. Like Dusty's grandfather, Jason denies a tidy separation between presence and absence. Our inability to either define him or dismiss him, coupled with our desire to engage him, epitomizes possibility. Unlike the monsters mentioned earlier who threaten to decimate, Jason's ghost is hope waiting in the wings.

The frame of the performance supports my interpretation. After the credits, which communicate the performance is “*With Jason Zingsheim*,” we first encounter Jason through his voice in the dark. Dusty, as Tooter Turtle (a 1960s cartoon that I wouldn’t expect you to know—I had to look it up) says, “Oh, please Mr. Wizard, let me try” and Jason, as Mr. Wizard the Lizard, replies, “Very well, my boy, but be careful.” Because I don’t know the reference immediately, its significance is lost on me. However, with the slightest bit of research, I learn that the cartoon is a morality tale where Tooter repeatedly called upon Mr. Wizard to transport him to someplace in the past. The story always ended the same with Tooter getting into trouble and calling out “Help! Mr. Wizard,” and Mr. Wizard coming to the rescue with the spell “Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, drome, time for this one to come home.” We eventually hear this line in *Blasphemies*, spoken by Jason. It is the only line we ever see him speak *live*, 51 ½ minutes into a 60 minute show. Yet, Jason, as Mr. Wizard and “the ghost” and Jason, has been with us all along.

The ghost’s presence/absence reminds us of the persistent simultaneity of existence (way better than parenthetical asides or acknowledging the coexistence of the familiar and the formal by calling someone by his first name and then all of a sudden switching to his last). The ghost refuses easy definitions and the irresponsibility of forced closure. Its possibility and power are situated in our inability to pin it down. Put it this way: if a ghost showed up fully embodied and explained exactly who or what it was and exactly what it wanted, it wouldn’t be a ghost, or at least, it certainly would cease to haunt you. By allowing the ghost to haunt the performance, *Blasphemies* slips off the strict schedule of chronology, confronts the clock, and Dusty gets his wish:

I wish I could go back. I’d ask that perverted little towhead to draw me a different picture. His lines would bend and break into one another, dancing on and off the page, refusing to adhere to the limitations that it imposes, marked and crayoned lines would just slide off the tracing paper, onto the desk, off of the edge, into the air, continuing their journey out the window, past the large Maple tree.

(wrap up)

As an artist/scholar, *Blasphemies* reminds me that a solo show is never solo; the solitary genius gets lots of help. We are never completely alone. There are traces of others everywhere—in the candy bucket, in the depths of the pool, at the opening door of a subway car. These traces shape us. They focus our attention. They appear in our art/work, and we’d be wise to acknowledge them. *Blasphemies* also affirms my conviction that we can put popular culture to work in our performances, on our terms. Its familiar images, narratives, and forms hold the potential for connection, celebration, and critique. Like Dusty, we might choose to burn down the house of popular culture and rebuild it a few times. *Blasphemies* gives me hope we can.

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Blasphemies reminds me, as a person in the world, that “we” have work to do. Jason, as Dusty’s partner, in the performance and in life, represents the choice to grow old with others rather than alone. While my understanding of “others” extends beyond a spouse or life partner to include family, friends, pets, colleagues, and fellow humans (present or absent) who inspire, support, and challenge us, who remind us that to be engaged in relationship with others is to be alive, I also acknowledge that some want to deny others certain aspects of that life. *Blasphemies* testifies to the gift of the other. It tells me that the narrative that satisfies most is (always) being in relationship with the other, and we all deserve the opportunity to choose that narrative.

(a toast)

To Dusty and Jason:

Dusty, thanks for asking to me review the show. Your video wasn’t half as bad as I imagined. In fact, it was very good. You must have filmed it on more than one night from different angles or used two cameras. The editing looked professional. I’m jealous you did it yourself. I’ve always gotten someone else to do it for me, and then, I’m always waiting around, and when it’s finally done, I can’t fix the little things that bug me. Thanks for all your good work and for getting it out there. I’m going to use it in class to teach a variety of concepts. Off the top of my head, I can use it as an example of weaving popular culture into our own stories or critiquing the way we allow the texts of popular culture to limit the way we see ourselves or narrate our lives. I can use the entire performance as an example of classic mythic structure. I can use the dinosaur fairytale as an example of metaphor. The Buffalo wings will be good in performance art, as will the “naked” dance. I’m sure your monsters will pop up in my horror class; I’ve never considered those particular monsters as a group, and I appreciate the chance to do so. Most of all, thanks for being an inspiring colleague. Thanks for your honesty, your hard work, your talent.

Jason, thanks for being there for Dusty. I really see him pushing himself and growing as a performance artist, and your love and support probably deserve some of the credit. Thanks for your performing body and your obvious commitment. The two of you move in unison with confidence and it gives me such pleasure. I’m going out on a limb here, but thanks for listening to Dusty as the ideas for the show took shape. Your feedback or ability to just listen probably contributed a great deal to the overall product, and I imagine it was years in the making. And thanks for haunting me. I would have probably come up with a very different review had you not done that.

Dusty and Jason, I wish you the best in your life together. May your art/work always be enriched by your relationship and vice-versa. And may the possibilities be as open for you as they were for little perverted towhead Dusty. And ditto all the blessings

Dusty had for Brian and Jimmy at the end of the show. Thanks for the gift of *Blasphemies on Forever*. I still wish I had been there.

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