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FOOD | Barrel's roll + **ARTS** | John Cage's cloud

City Paper's Annual
**WRITING
CONTEST**
is back.
See p. 15

One-on-one with
Sherman Alexie

Now is the winter
of **Summer Fiction**



the lowdown on
music, theater,
dance and more

2ND
SEASON
ARTS

JUMATATU POE
HITS THE GROUND RUNNING



Firm Footage

Jumatatu Poe's audio/visual obsession keeps his dancers on their toes.

By Bruce Walsh

IN STOCKING FEET, Jumatatu Poe sits onstage with his BlackBerry laying just a few inches from his right hand. At least two cameras are rolling during this audience talkback for this late November preview of *Flatland*, at the Performance Garage in Fairmount, but Poe's phone is likely recording audio all the same. He likes to switch the recorder on at important moments — or any moment, for that matter.

A question about dialogue in the piece comes from the audience.

"Actually, I've been thinking about bringing a screenwriter into the process to help craft some of the language," he says, but then notices that the dancers sitting just behind him are trying to get his attention. He slaps himself on the head and grins: "Playwright! Of course I meant playwright," he says, shaking his phone in frustration. "I guess I can't help but think digitally."

Five minutes later the audience is divided into small groups for further discussion. Dancers — still flush from performance — prod them for thoughts on *Flatland*. A cameraman makes his way around the space, pointing the lens at people as they nervously attempt to interpret what they've just seen.

"This is modern dance," someone says. "I thought the whole point was that we're not supposed to get it." But these patrons have clearly never met Poe. He's a choreographer who desperately wants to be on the same wavelength as his audience. And he compulsively records as many of their reactions as he can — digitally.

At the corner of the stage, Shannon Murphy leads a group of audience members that includes former Urban Bush Women dancer Theresa Shockley and local actress Sarah Sanford. Murphy is attempting to record the conversation with her phone. It isn't quite working. She interrupts Shockley twice to restart the device. When she interrupts a third time, Sanford gently places a hand on the young woman's wrist, saying softly, "Let's just try to live in the moment for now."

POE STARTED DANCING at Swarthmore College. Since then he's completed an M.F.A. in dance at Temple University, and has performed with just about every contemporary company in town, including Leah Stein, Kate Watson-Wallace, Zane Booker, Charles Anderson and Group Motion. At 28, Poe has certainly paid his dues. Along with Murphy and Shavon Norris, he directs idiosyncratic productions,

a group he founded two years ago in hopes of launching a career as a choreographer.

So far, so good.

Poe has spent the last two years developing *Flatland*, most recently with the help of a \$20,000 Pew/Dance Advance grant. Roughly speaking, the piece is a 70-minute expression of his obsession with social media and communication technology.

In *Flatland* we find expressive bodies constrained — sometimes literally tied down — to a two-dimensional plane. Characters arise from the frenzied movements of the group, only to dehumanize themselves, often comically so. But a series of fluid duets laces through the absurdity, reminding us of a tenderness obscured, but never truly rubbed out. The dance is a manic collage of styles — from elegant,

links these vignettes together for me. I see his voice throughout."

"I think specialization in one technique is less important for [dancers] now. I like to try to figure out what it takes to do everything," says Poe. "And, yeah, there's something really arrogant about that. All of these styles require rigorous attention to detail. But that's what I'm after, that shift from one to the next — a total gravity shift."

That means a lot of homework for *Flatland's* 11 performers. Recordings of almost every rehearsal are uploaded onto blip.tv, where dancers can meticulously review their own movements.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," says dancer Gabrielle Revlock. "The first thing we did was the opening sequence, which was pretty abstract. It was absolutely pure dance. Everything had to do with these complex counts. No one else was on my same count, so I used the video a lot to get my specific thing down."

Poe is constantly incorporating video into every aspect of the process. He often videotapes himself giving notes. He



SMILE, YOU'RE ON CANDID CAMERA: Temple grad Jumatatu Poe digitally records as much data as he can for *Flatland*, a piece he's spent the last two years developing.

NEAL SANTOS

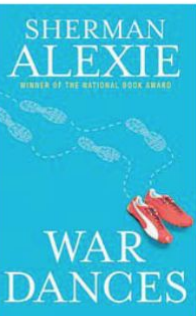
modern floor work to improvisational dialogue and raw, guttural movements.

"There are just so many things happening at one time. There's constantly a new aesthetic rising to the surface, just as another is falling into the background," says local choreographer Makoto Hirano, who was part of a feedback panel that advised Poe during *Flatland's* early stages. "It's clearly an ensemble piece, being led by [Poe], and that's what

even set up a "confession camera" during rehearsals, so dancers could purge their innermost frustrations, a la MTV's *The Real World*.

Revlock wasn't having it: "That was not gonna happen. No way. If have something I want to say about the process, I'll say it to his face. But he kept pushing it!"

>> continued on page 22



For One Philadelphia author Sherman Alexie, writing is remembering.

By Lee Stabert

The War Within

EVEN OVER THE phone, you can tell Sherman Alexie laughs with his whole body. The author, who chatted with *City Paper* from his office in Seattle, has a jovial nature that belies the wistful, occasionally heartbreaking nature of his writing. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian (his preferred terminology) who grew up on a reservation in Washington state, Alexie has been chosen as the focus of 2011's One Book, One Philadelphia project, a citywide book club aimed at building community through reading. The Free Library has selected both *War Dances*, an exquisite collection of poetry and short stories, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a young adult novel and winner of a 2007 National Book Award.

CITY PAPER: In an appearance on the *Colbert Report*, you explained that you don't allow your books to be available digitally because it hurts local book communities. This project is trying to foster one. How did you get involved with One Book, One Philadelphia?

SHERMAN ALEXIE: They approached me. I've done it in a few cities, but Philadelphia is by far the largest. And the thing that excited me — and that I think is ironic and fun — is that the city where the U.S. was founded is all reading a book by an Indian. It's a hilarious take on colonialism. Me and the Liberty Bell — both cracked.

CP: Your work deals a lot with storytelling, and storytellers. In *War Dances*, the protagonists tend to be musicians, filmmakers and writers.

SA: It never even occurred to me that they were all storytellers, in one form or another, that way. As you were asking the question, I thought maybe it was some sort of nostalgia, in this digital age. I think maybe I was subconsciously calling back old ways of telling stories amid all this rapid change. The last two years, I've just been lonely about the way things used to be. ... *War Dances* is really structured like my very first book, *The Business of Fancydancing*, so I guess you could say it was an exercise in pitiful nostalgia.

CP: By constantly reinforcing the idea of storytelling as an act, you call attention to the fact that it's not objective. In this collection, the idea arises again and again that something can be factually false but emotionally true.

SA: I'm a literary writer, but I'm also an entertainer. Much in the same way you look at a TV or watch a stage performance, [as a writer] you can drop in and out of awareness of the frame. Just now — when I missed our phone call — I was utterly unaware that I was anything but a poet. I was in the world of the poem. [Alexie was late for our interview because he was writing a poem on the death of those birds in Arkansas.]



CP: There are a lot of repeated, bedrock stories and ideas in your writing. Are some of those repeated narrative structures autobiographical? Is that why you keep coming back to them?

SA: I wrote a line in a poem this morning that read, "Why does that rhubarb patch keep coming back to me?" ... I never feel like I've gotten *there* — that I've written the thing I need to write about it, or that I've arrived at a place where I fully understand the thing. So, you can think of my repetitions as me constantly interrogating my memory.

CP: *War Dances* is so dynamic in terms of the narrative structure — there's poetry, short stories, odd, short prose thoughts and even lists.

SA: Well, it's funny — *True Diary* ... was so dang successful. It just dropped off *The New York Times* list after being there for three years. And part of me, certainly, while I enjoy the mainstream success, resists it. I think I wrote *War Dances*, and constructed it, with the idea of pushing back. I was writing a book that not only called back to my first books, but called back to what I really am: a small-press alternative writer who got lucky. And, once again, it's also nostalgia. When we were working on it, the editor and I, we thought of it as a mix tape. There's even an "Ode to Mix Tapes" poem in there. So, the whole idea was to create a variety of selections that told an overall story.

CP: This book is also *really funny*. I read it on a plane and disturbed the person next to me. I think your writing continues to get funnier.

SA: Part of it is probably because I've really turned my public appearances into theater in a sense — monologues. I really do focus on the comedic aspects during my talks. I think it's just a tool I've been honing on stage for years that's found its way into the fiction more and more.

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★ 2011 One Book, One Philadelphia runs Jan. 19-March 17. For details, visit freelibrary.org.

<< continued from page 21

"There's a confession camera over there! I mean, what am I supposed to say?"

HIRANO IS THE only person at the 700 Club without a drink. He looks a bit out of place amongst the rowdy happy-hour crowd, as he discusses *Flatland* with a detached tone, something like an HVAC repairman inspecting duct work.

But then the twentysomething choreographer leans back against the wall. He bunches up his mouth tightly as he thinks, then wonders aloud, "Right now [Poe] is collecting all of this data — like tons of it. And I'm not sure what he's doing with it. I feel like he's hoarding it — like he's got this basement full of data, and sometimes I wonder, what is it that he wants to learn from all of it?"

Five blocks away, Poe finishes a rehearsal with three *Flatland* dancers in a freezing-cold converted warehouse. The dancers mark through a two-minute segment repeatedly, as Poe shifts the camera around the room to capture different perspectives. Eventually he packs the camera and tripod into a duffel bag, then straps a book bag (containing yet another digital video camera) onto his back.

"Sure. I know. It's a big paradox," he

"I JUST WANT TO SEE EVERYTHING THAT'S THERE."

says between sips of coffee at a nearby café. "I know I'm reflected in *Flatland* — the way I'm consumed by media. I know that. But I don't see it as I'm saying, "This is what's wrong with the world." I see it just like, "These are the things that happen in our lives."

But why record so much of the audience? At the workshop performances, every audience member had to sign a waiver allowing Poe and company to tape them.

"I want my work to inspire conversation, so I want to know what those conversations are," he explains. "It's not like we're recording the audience to make sure they understand what we're saying. I just want to see everything that's there — the stuff that lives in our bodies and comes out onstage. I want to see that from fresh eyes, and I want to hear about it from as many perspectives as possible."

"I think making artwork can be therapeutic," says Revlock. "It's a way to keep yourself in check with issues you may be struggling with."

Then she pauses for a moment and adds, "It's one thing to identify the problem, but it's another thing to be able to fix it, right?"

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★ *Flatland*, Sat., Jan. 15, 8 p.m., \$25, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut St., 215-898-3900, annenbergcenter.org.