
PILLSBURY HOUSE THEATRE

mainstage breaking ice chicago avenue project

COVER PAGE

Naked Stages 2014 – COVER PAGE

Jerome Performance Art Commissioning Program

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WHITE [people]

Project Title

performance installation

Are you applying to create a performance for the stage or to create a performance installation?

Eric F. Avery

Interdisciplinary Artist/Educator

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SOLO/LEAD ARTIST

- 2014 **it's very difficult to keep** – design, direction, performance.
Five Myles, Brooklyn, NY
Minneapolis³ – design, direction.
Northern Spark, Minneapolis, MN
- 2013 **The HOUSE Show** – performance, direction.
My House. Minneapolis, MN
Objectification – design, director.
Towson University, Baltimore, MD.
Paper Pieces – performance, design.
Black Cherry Puppet Theatre, Baltimore, MD.
- 2012 **Adventure in Technology 'n Stuff** – performance, design.
Black Cherry Puppet Theatre, Baltimore, MD.
The Abstract Mirror Shadow – performance, design.
14K Cabaret, Baltimore, MD.
- 2011 **Ex-gays** – playwright, co-director.
Savage Umbrella, Minneapolis, MN.
Minnesota Fringe Festival, Minneapolis, MN.
Looking – playwright.
Un Saddest Factory, Baltimore, MD.
- 2010 **The Winter Adventures of Happy** – performance, design.
Bryant Lake Bowl, Minneapolis, MN.
- 2008 **The Painter** – director.
Bedlam Theatre, Minneapolis, MN.
- 2007 **Cabaret Harlem** – performance, design, director.
Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS.
America:aciremA – performance, direction, design, playwright
Bryant Lake Bowl, Minneapolis, MN.
Kansas City Fringe, Kansas City, MO.
Calgary Fringe, Calgary, CA.
Workhouse Theatre, Minneapolis, MN.
- 2006 **Spectrum** – design, director.
Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS.

COLLABORATING ARTIST (selections)

- 2014 **Enough** – collaborator.
Mabou Mines, New York, NY
Basil Twist's Rite of Spring – puppeteer, asst. director.
Lincoln Center, New York, NY
Carolina Performing Arts, Chapel Hill, NC.
- 2013 **La Divina Caricatura** – puppeteer.
Mabou Mines, New York, NY
- 2012 **21 Things I Never Told Chicago** – puppeteer, performer, asst. director.
Dixon Place, New York, NY.
- 2011 **A Grain of Sand** – puppet, lighting, co-scenic design.
Marder Theatre, Towson, MD.
A Midsummer Night's Dream – costume, prop design.
Theatre Terra Firma, St. Paul, MN.

EDUCATION

- 2012 **Towson University, MFA Interdisciplinary Theatre**
2006 **University of Kansas, BGS Theatre**

TEACHING

- 2014 **Teaching Artist.** Children's Theatre Company. Minneapolis, MN
2013 **Teaching Artist.** Public Art St. Paul. St. Paul, MN.
2012 **Instructor.** Theatre for Social Change, THEA 310. Towson University.
2012 – 2007 **Teaching Artist,** Youth Performance Company. Minneapolis, MN
2011 **Instructor.** Introduction to Theatre, THEA 103. Towson University.
2007 – 2006 **Instructor.** Hip-hop & jazz. Betty Jo's Dance Center. Rosemount, MN.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

- 2012 – 2010 **Artistic Director,** Social Action Project. Baltimore, MD.
2012 **Artistic Directing Intern,** Centerstage. Baltimore, MD.
2012 – 2007 **Founder & Company Member,** Savage Umbrella. Minneapolis, MN.
2010 – 2009 **AmeriCorps Theatre Coordinator,** VSA North 4th Art Center. ABQ, NM

AWARDS, COMMISSIONS, & RESIDENCIES

- 2014 Pilot Balloon Church Residency Program, Lawrence, KS.
2011 Commission to create *Based on a True Story*, Towson University
2008 Lavender Magazine Outstanding Performance (Blue Door)
2007 Commission to create *Cabaret Harlem*, Spencer Museum of Art
2006 Commission to develop a Langston Hughes play, University Theatre
2006 Lewin and Jean Ann Goff Travel Grant
2006 New Theatre Guild Grant
2001 Oprah's Angel Network Scholar, Recipient of \$25,000 scholarship

1.

Over the past decade I have created over a dozen of my own works and been involved in the creation and production numerous original works of performance. They have ranged from works written by new playwrights or myself, devised works, improvised pieces, and more recently as performance installations and other genre busting experiments. My undergraduate training at University of Kansas exposed me to the canon and traditional theatre training, as well as to experimental performance and the possibility of creating my own work. After graduating I moved to Minneapolis and co-founded Savage Umbrella, a theatre partnership dedicated to creating socially relevant new works of performance. During this time I also maintained a freelance career as a performer and educator.

Currently, I'm navigating a professional and artistic balance between the worlds of visual and performing arts. There are views that I can't necessarily voice in many other development programs, because they are narrowly focused on the idea of developing theatre. I don't take issue with telling stories, although my tendency is towards non-linear works and thematic collage. During grad school I began to articulate my objections to current narrative conventions and traditions in theatre, which primarily revolve around the treatment of the audience. They are placed in a passive role similar to television or a movie, and frankly liveness is the only thing keeping theatre relevant to a modern viewer. The fact we can share the same air or a finite moment in time and space is incredibly powerful, and so many practitioners ignore this idea.

The fact that Naked Stages specializes in a brand of critical thought outside of mainstream expectations is incredibly appealing. Another factor that excited me is the program's support of artists creating work that is tied to space, and understanding that a theatre might not be the ideal setting for that a given piece. Naked Stages also seems to understand how often what we envision our work to be at the beginning of a process is completely transformed by the end. The process of creating, critiquing and editing is what allows a final product of any sort to exist; it's neither a side effect nor symptom. I have my agenda, but I'm ready to be transformed at any moment. I'm ready to bring what I've got, and I'm open to the journey Naked Stages will provide.

I don't think it's a coincidence that emergence and emergency are so close. I feel a great urgency to spread my work far and wide, to allow art the space to hold conversations I've only previously had in private spheres. "I want to break free," sang Queen. Recently, I won a Cultural Community Partnership with Zainab Musa, my project *Minneapolis*³ was selected to be presented at Northern Spark 2014, and I'm presenting my work in NYC for the first time in August. My career is gaining momentum and an opportunity such as this would not only allow me the opportunity to create a challenging piece I've been incubating for a year or so, but I would be able to harness the energy around this piece to propel myself forward into other opportunities, collaborations, grants, and projects.

2.

WHITE [people] is an experimental performance installation. It is an examination of blackness through critiquing the kind of privilege that exists for having light colored skin and straight hair. There is much more to this piece than Hegel's dialectic, but it does ask if how greatness can be perceived without its opposite. I.e. must we be less so that you may be more? It sets out to truly understand what the dominant culture is and how it functions.

The project will make use of my body, written and possibly spoken text, installation/transformation of space, and abstract puppetry (which one could also think of as kinetic scenography) as the primary means of creating an environment and experience for the audience. The performance will take place in and around the space, which is currently inspired by the idea of constructing everything out of white materials. This idea not only makes all our own color more apparent, but also gives us a blank slate to start from. I'm both interested in creating an installation that exists outside of time like many visual art objects and I'd like to explore creating/transforming space as part of the performance.

This particular work is a response to my own artistic process. For years I've been struggling to ever create a cogent response to issues of race. I recently realized that it wasn't being a LGBT man of color that I was interested in critiquing, but rather the culture and systems that encourage me to feel discomfort in this queer brown body. Rather than relying on a narrative or anything resembling Aristotelian unities, this piece will respond to and utilize elements from structures with semiotic and cultural significance to me such as minstrel shows, a church service, a sporting event, etc.

I have little interest in what is "universal." Much of the time universals are based on a perceived similarity through the lens of the dominant culture. It's bizarre to me that when some people talk about diversity they are looking for what we have in common, i.e. what can be easily understood by comparison to one's self. The beauty of diversity is what is different about us, what we don't understand, what we might not be able to ever understand. I think that embracing universality is incredibly problematic and shuts down the possibility of richer, and likely more difficult, conversations with one another. A major goal for this project is to explore and seek to understand this tension.

I currently expect to perform this piece outside of the theatre. I don't know what the technical needs of the piece are because I don't know the building very well, but I'm an experienced designer who has created site-specific work before and I'm prepared to create work that can be scaled to the resources available.

3.

I have had many experience in this mode of working and excited to engage in it once again. The majority of my graduate career was based on this model of peer review. Throughout my time at Towson University I was creating multiple works of performance at a time and receiving weekly critiques as well as critiquing and responding the work of peers. During my time as a co-artistic director of Savage Umbrella, we used the principle that artists with different aesthetics, viewpoints, and lived experiences could still support each other's work through conversation and sharing of their work. Through weekly meetings, peer reviews, closed workshops, and workshop productions we developed numerous works.

There are some works that I need to create alone, but my proposed project is not one of them. I need outside eyes of multiple races, bodies, and experiences to create *WHITE [people]* because this is a complicated subject matter and I want to create a space to begin difficult conversations. I can't begin to understand those conversations alone and I think it would be ruinous to take this work directly to the public, where it has as much potential to do harm as good.

It's not easy to find an artistic home for this project. For just as many programs as I've gotten into with other works this piece has never been awarded. I need a venue that is not only "ok" with me pursuing this subject matter, but is excited to engage myself, an audience, and fellow artists in a critical dialogue concerning culture that implicates us all.

Lastly, I'm excited about belonging to a cohort of artists. My experience is diverse and I'm happy to share my thoughts, perspectives, and experiences with my fellow artists in the program. I look forward to connecting with like-minded and differently-minded artists. I'm a firm believer in coming together through difference. I'm not bummed when someone doesn't get my work I consider it an opportunity for conversation and a chance for myself to learn.

B Billy Xiong is my full name and my dream is to inspire change from my art and to show the world that a Hmong boy, who began his life in a small trailer park in Menomonie, Wisconsin, can make a difference in the community. Some people call me Funk, which is short for my bboy name; Funkzilla, my family calls me B, and my friends know me by Billy. When I was four years old, my family came here to the land of 10,000 lakes in search of a better life for me and my siblings. Though I am technically a Wisconsinian-an, I suppose; I do consider Minnesota to be my home. It was here in the streets of Frogtown and eastside Saint Paul that I became who I am.

I was a freshman at Central Sr. High School when I began my journey into the world that I now call art. It was after school one day that my cousin invited me to “this dance thing at this store near here.” At first I was hesitant but I ultimately accepted his invitation on the mention of it being full of “cute girls, dude.” The Center for Hmong Arts and Talents is where we ended up after the walk from school; Suite #220 at 995 University Ave. W St. Paul, MN 55104. The “dance thing” was actually a hip-hop dance class, instructed by Chandara Pen. The studio became my home away from home that day and has remained so until this very day; wherever I end up in life, I’ll always remember it to be where I found myself and realized my dreams.

I’ve come a long way since then and still have a long way to go. So far, the professional and amateur theater productions that I’ve had the privilege of performing in are; In A Minute’s *Once Upon A Mattress* (2009), C.H.A.T.’s *Hmonglish Musical* (2009) and *Family Portrait: Love and Saving Grace* (2010), Katie Ka Vang’s *W.T.F.* (2011), Mu Performing Arts’ *New Faces Showcase* (2012) along with *F.O.B.* (2013), Green T’s *The Hobbit* (2012), HMSA’s *Peb Za Dab Neej: Our Folklore* (2013), and Climb Theater’s *A Deeper Look* (2013,2014). Of the dozens of dance shows and performances that I’ve been involved in over the years, I would say that my most notable projects from that list would be; The MN History Center’s *Then Now Wow* (2013), *Asian Heritage Festival* (2013), *Opening* (2012), and *Empowering Teens* (2013) exhibits; in which a team of me and 3 others choreographed 30 minute routines for each of the individual exhibits, Bedlam Theatre’s *Big Lowdown Ten Fest* (2013); in which a partner and I managed and created an original 10 minute dance piece called *Dream Box*, and C.H.A.T.’s *A.S.U. Arts Festivals* (2008, 2009, and 2010; in which I performed and assisted in choreographing original pieces spanning from 5-10 minutes in length. In the 7 years of my competitive breakdancing, my biggest accomplishments are in winning the *Damage Control 4v4* (2010) and *Rock the Beat Jam* (2011) breakdance tournaments and in becoming a finalist in *Jay’s Back to School Jam* (2011).

As of today, I am in my first year at Metropolitan State University; as a part time student pursuing a creative writing degree, attending workshops by Mu Performing Arts; as a full-tuition scholarship recipient for their new Mu Theater Intensive training program instructed by Randy Reyes, and developing my bboy/breakdance skills through competing and practice.

I am applying to the *Naked Stages* program at this time because I am now more ready than ever to take the next step in my career; to transcend beyond being “just a dancer that acts” and be recognized as a respected up-and-coming Hmong artist with a voice and a story to tell. After almost 8 years of now using my art mostly as a tool for dealing with my own personal struggles, I am now ready to learn how to use it, with *Pillsbury House Theatre’s* mentorship and support, to raise awareness and help others to voice their thoughts to the issues in the community that have affected me and my peers for so long.

Having spent the majority of my artistic experience as a competitive dancer going from gig to gig, I’ve never had much of a chance to fully express and voice my opinion on an issue through my discipline. Most of my creative experience when it comes to dancing has been in part of my dance crew; FloorTribe, where the creative process has been collective. I have co-created, collectively choreographed and mixed music for over 20 performances; the longest being a 30 minute routine for when we performed for the MN History Center. In 2013, I created *Dream Box*, a 10-minute dance piece for Bedlam Theater’s *The Big Lowdown Ten Fest*. It was my first experience in having complete creative control over a show. I wrote the story, designed the lighting, lead the choreography, and selected and mixed the music. It was an amazing experience in which I learned a lot about putting on a show, but nothing near enough for what I plan on producing. When I began my journey into theater, I immediately fell in love with it because I could convey so much more in terms of emotion and story as opposed to when I was just dancing. This love was cemented in me when during the run of *Hmonglish Musical*, my mother came up to me in tears and told me of how thankful she was for me telling such a story. I began my creative experience in theater when I joined the Youth Leadership Group (YLG) at the Center for Hmong Arts & Talents (CHAT) in 2009. The YLG was a group of 7 high school students that gained leadership skills through the creation of theater. Under the guidance of Sun-Mee Chomet and Katie-Hae Leo, we created *Hmonglish Musical* (2009) and *Family Portrait: Love and Saving Grace* (2010), in which we focused on topics such as bullying, polygamy, and LGBTQ issues in the Hmong community that affected us as Hmong-American youth dealing with bi-cultural identities. In addition to my creative experience in theater, I also have two original written monologues used in the productions of CHAT’s *Family Portrait: Love and Saving Grace* (2010); which was a short comedic piece on the addiction to porn, and Climb Theatre’s *A Deeper Look* (2013 & 2014); in which I wrote about my mother raising me as a single parent. If there’s anything that I’ve learned from my collective artistic experience in creating art, through any form, it is that there is still an ocean of knowledge out there that I still need to explore more to understand what goes into creating and running a full-fledged production; which is something that I’ve always wanted to do.

The *Naked Stages* program’s focus on the creative process, as defined by Pillsbury House Theatre, would benefit me in my development as an artist tremendously by helping me fully understand how to breathe life into an idea for performance, artistically and technically. With the help of *Pillsbury House Theatre*, I would be able to strengthen my familiarity in an area that I lack knowledge of; the technical procedures and aspects that go into organizing and managing a full-scale production. Under the mentorship and support of this program I will also be able to gain knowledge on how to incorporate my own personal experiences into discovering the many parts that compile into turning an idea into a workable performance piece and how to then turn that piece into a full-fledged production. I would be able to learn how to provide more clarity and understanding to the interpretation of an idea through my trade as well as acquaint myself with the managing and business side of producing such a production through the *Naked Stages* program; skills that would indefinitely benefit me for the rest of my life, not just specifically when it comes to my development as an artist.

Describe your proposed project?

My project's focus is on divorce and how it has affected my family and me. When I was 10 years old my mother, a door-to-door saleswoman at the time, was awarded an all-expenses-paid vacation to Disney World, by her workplace, for the entire family. My most vivid memory from the vacation was that of my mother on her knees begging my father not to leave while he screamed at her for being pathetic as my siblings and I quietly sat in the connecting hotel-room pretending not to hear. All of my life I've watched my mother find love in unfaithful, immoral men so much that sometimes I feel it has become a "curse" that I've also inherited; one that has proven all too hauntingly true when it comes to my relationship experiences. This is just one of the many images that I am sharing in my project along with personal accounts from my siblings and parents as well; ranging from my little sister's suicide attempt to my father's habits and addiction. This will all be done through an on-stage production of original monologues, home videos, excerpts of recorded interviews, and dance pieces to original music; showcasing and interpreting the many ways in which divorce has impacted my siblings and me through a narrative of how I struggled and dealt with the relationships, depression, and insecurities that arose after my parents' separation in becoming who I am today; an artist, a son, a brother, and a Hmong man. By demonstrating how divorce has affected my family and I through sharing these very personal stories I hope to bring awareness to the topic of divorce and the affects that it has on a Hmong family and, at the same time, learn more about my understanding of who I am as an artist and an individual.

Questions being addressed and asked in my work;

- How do Hmong values tie into the idea of divorce?
- How does divorce affect Hmong men, children, and women, young and old?
- Can the issue be addressed in any way?
- What role has divorce played in the shaping of my idea of love, values, and relationships?
- Are there differences between a Hmong divorce and a traditional American divorce?
- How has my art affected me, mentally, emotionally, spiritually?
- Can dance tell a story by itself?
- When is language necessary to portray the chosen themes and ideas?
- What are my political views on my art and what is the mission of my art?

What tech needs are you anticipating for your proposed performance?

For the tech details of my project, my needs are similar to that of a typical on-stage theater production. I will require a stage, video, sound, and lighting. The stage would need to be smooth enough to slide on and the video would be projected onto a white screen. Music and snippets of recorded interviews would make up the sound. For costumes and props, I won't need much; simple casual outfits and most likely a few set pieces to move around, that would remain on stage for every scene.

What artistic forms are you exploring?

With my project, I will be exploring the different ways in which writing, dancing, video, acting, and music can be intertwined, mixed, and interpreted to portray messages, thoughts, and ideas. Through experimenting with the different elements of an on-stage production, I would be able to more fully understand how to utilize my own voice and vision in the creation of artistic work.

Naked Stages involves group work, artist meetings/workshops, intense process, and evaluation. Have you had any experience with this methodology? How do you feel about making a full commitment to this way of working?

When it comes to how I feel about committing to the way of working as defined by the *Naked Stages*, I really have no issue at all with it. Most, if not all, of my creative experience as an artist has been in the same manner as this program. *Naked Stage's* way of working and methodology is very similar to that of the process in which you must go through to maintain your abilities in breakdancing, a process in which I have been in practice of for almost 8 years now. You will always have a crew that you practice with and learn from; *group work*, and attend sessions and classes in which other dancers of all skill-levels usually gather to practice or learn; *artist meetings/workshops*. In addition to that process, is the way in which you must proceed to learn any move; through physical and mental trial-and-error or in other words *intense process and evaluation*. Another example to reinforce my familiarity of this program's method of work would be when I was with the Youth Leadership Group at the Center for Hmong Arts & Talents. Throughout the weekly meetings, in which YLG conducted itself, Sun-Mee Chomet and Katie-Hae Leo taught us about how to move and act in an on-stage theater environment. Along with those weekly workshops and meetings, we also developed monologues and researched on our chosen topics of discussion, for the plays that we then created with that information. Being as I am currently developing my acting skills through the Mu Theater Intensive program provided by Mu Performing Arts, it also runs through a very, very strict process that is very similar to the way ran by this program; another part of my experience as an artist that relates to the methodology of the *Naked Stages* program.