

# InfiniteBody

art and creative consciousness by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Friday, October 30, 2015

## Experimenting with Miss Ruth: Lionel Popkin at Abrons



(Left to right) Lionel Popkin, Emily Beattie and Carolyn Hall  
in Popkin's *Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore*  
(photo: Cristal Jones)

*Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, says dancer-choreographer **Lionel Popkin**. And why not? Well, maybe that's because Ruth St. Denis--illustrious modern dance pioneer--was a white woman who got famous for pushing a vaudevillian Orientalist fantasy, and Popkin is a contemporary dancer of Jewish-Indian lineage who is more than ready to go toe-to-toe with her. His hour-long dance at **Abrons Arts Center**--a trio performed with enchanting **Emily Beattie** and **Carolyn Hall**--asserts a right to mess in and mess up her space in the greater interest of, perhaps, starting to clean up his own ambivalence.

Popkin takes a leaf blower to St. Denis's legacy, the way he takes a leaf blower to Beattie's abundant hair, stirring up swirls of theater dust in the process. When we first see them, both are dressed in a uniform of blue-collar workers--heavy, navy-colored coveralls--suggesting a certain no-nonsense approach to dance, the hallmark of more recent dance eras. By contrast, the glam St. Denis was all about sparkly artifice and nonsense and just plain making shit up.



Lionel Popkin  
(photo: Brian Mengini)

Like a Ghostbusters crew, Popkin and his dancers venture deep into an ectoplasmic detritus of discarded saris and veils, the haul of St. Denis's far and frequent travel, strewn across the theater floor. Choreographic instructions (projected in white type on the backdrop) will be indifferently observed because, modeling St. Denis, Popkin says, they have given themselves leverage to excavate,

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Eva Yaa Asantewaa

appropriate and revise.

Watching a Hall solo, in particular--the one with the green skirt we're told "she found at a thrift store for seven dollars"--I have a sense of Popkin thinking through what he, as an American dancer, inherited from St. Denis and her age. He tips his hat to her ingenuity, her self-assurance and way of presenting herself, showing us something in her that transcended the wrongheaded aesthetics. Something useful in the way the mothers of modern dance clawed out a place for this art in the world's imagination and fought to keep it alive so folks could do and see it differently today. Like with more awareness. When we actually have awareness, that is.

*Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore* is well danced and fun. But who wins out here? Well, from Popkin's final words, it's clear that, as activists always say, the struggle continues.

Music composed and performed live by **Guy Klucevsek** (accordion) with **Mary Rowell**, violinist (ETHEL); costumes and set design by **Marcus Kuiland-Nazario**; lighting design by **Christopher Kuhl**; video design by **Cari Ann Shim Sham**

*Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, curated by **Laurie Uprichard** for her *Travelogues* series, continues through November 1 with performances tonight and Saturday at 7:30pm and Sunday at 3pm. For information and tickets, click [here](#).

**Abrons Arts Center (Experimental Theater)**

466 Grand Street (between Pitt and Willett Streets), Manhattan  
([map/directions](#))

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