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George Washington Slept Here, Not Alone, And Tap-Danced, Too

Ann Liv Young, near right, as George Washington in her new show, "The Bagwell in me." Far right, Ms. Young with Isabel Lewis, left, in "The Radio Show"; below left, Ms. Young, center, with Liz Santoro, left, and Emily Wexler in "Snow White."

'THE BAGWELL IN ME'

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By GIA KOURLAS

THE same Ann Liv Young who has stepped onstage, torn off all her clothes and rolled around in her dog's ashes like a bereaved stripper ("Tribute to Elliot") and has been penetrated with a dildo ("Snow White") lives on a sleepy street in Marine Park, Brooklyn. On a recent summer night crickets chirped, fireflies etched tiny sparks in the twilight, and baseball flickered from television sets in bay windows. Hanging the American flag seemed to be nothing less than a competitive sport.

No stars and stripes adorn the front of Ms. Young's house — where she lives with her fiancé, Michael Guerrero, their year-old daughter, Lovey, and their pit bull, Lydia — but inside is an explosion of chintz.

"It has lots of potential," Ms. Young, 27, said with a cheerful sigh. She was rehearsing her newest work, "The Bagwell in me," in her sewing room, where Isabel Lewis, a dancer whom Ms. Young met at the American Dance Festival in 1999, awaited instruction.

"It's the love story of Martha Washington, George Washington and Oney, their slave," Ms. Young, a Southern beauty with dark hair that cascades past her waist, explained. While the characters are based on real people, the story is Ms. Young's.

"Really it's a love story between Oney and her baby, who is George Washington's child. There are sex scenes, and there's a torture scene."

She cast a glance over the racks of clothes and stacks of vintage fabric. "This weekend I have to clean out this room and lay down a steel floor," she added. "We wear tap shoes the whole time."

Ms. Young's work is dense, outrageous and hard to brand. ("The Bagwell in me" is being billed as experimental theater.) She sings, speaks, dances and generally puts her audience on edge. The music is loud — pop songs by Michael Jackson and Britney Spears give her work a cheap, emotional undercurrent — and there is often a generous amount of nudity, though it is rarely titillating. Instead Ms. Young presents the body in realistic terms.

Employing coarse and seemingly amateurish movement, she plays with themes of control and aggression, sex and submission, and renders herself a ringleader of sorts, never disguising her impatience when, during a work, she orders a cast member to start over or abruptly cuts a scene. For the viewer it can be hard to tell if the show is unraveling or if Ms. Young's behavior is the show itself.

One memorable line came during a performance of "Snow White," which showcased Ms. Young as a vicious control freak wearing a dirty yellow skirt and a perpetual expression of scorn. After Ms. Young, visibly pregnant, criticized Mr. Guerrero about the sound, she muttered under her breath, "Never have a baby with a retard."

Still, it's refreshing to watch someone who isn't out to please. Unlike a great deal of the work created by her peers, with the most cloying pieces turning sincerity into a new form of victim art, Ms. Young makes everyone the victim: her cast, her audience and at times even herself.

She is a star, and as with many stars, Ms. Young provokes an equal measure of cult worship and fury. During her relatively short career Ms. Young has toured extensively in Europe and alienated many in the dance world by her quick success, all-consuming working methods and reluctance to become an enthusiastic participant in the downtown dance scene.

"I hate what people make," she said. "It doesn't seem like it's challenging, and it doesn't seem like it's very risk taking. I leave feeling depressed."

Ms. Young is fond of saying that she allows the work to tell her what it wants her to do. "It's kind of like sculpting," she said. "I just try to be sensitive to what I'm making. Everything influences it: time, the people that I'm working with, money and my state of mind. I don't look at it as dance. I look at it as just making something."

In "The Bagwell in me" — Bagwell is her mother's maiden name — Ms. Young takes on issues of racism, slavery and the hypocrisy of Southern manners. The cast is intimate: Ms. Young

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portrays fictionalized versions of both George and Martha Washington, Ms. Lewis plays Oney, and Mr. Guerrero is a jack-of-all-trades. (He performs in addition to running the sound. By day he is the assistant coach of the women's soccer team at New York University.)

In past works, like "Melissa is a Bitch" and "Michael," Ms. Young's direction has been a display of regimented control, with her, visible to the audience, overseeing the shows from the side and yelling, "Go!" as cues to her dancers. Every moment, even the blink of an eye, was choreographed. Reviewing "Michael" in 2005 for The New York Times, Roslyn Sulcas wrote that Ms. Young "is interested in bodies in space, and her vivid, rigorous theatrical imagination keeps her deploying them in challenging and mostly intriguing ways."

More recently she has loosened the reins. "Snow White," in particular, has become indelibly deconstructed. "It got to the point where we didn't even do the show," she recalled. "I would say: 'You know, I really don't feel like doing this. How about let's do a question-and-answer session?' And people would get really angry. They felt cheated."

For "The Bagwell in me," which will be performed next month at the Kitchen in Chelsea,

*Ann Liv Young
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victim: her cast, her
audience and herself.*

Ms. Young is experimenting with relaxing her working method. "I am really interested in seeing if the work can survive not being insanely rehearsed," she said. "For so long that's all I did, but it's hard to do that all the time, especially with a child."

Ms. Young was inspired to create "The Bagwell in me" after a visit last Christmas to her mother, who lives in Cluster Springs, Va. "I know that my mom's side of the family dates back to the 18th century and that they had slaves," she said. "There is old money in that family. None of it's been given to me, just if you're wondering."

They visited a friend of her mother's on Christmas Eve. "Their housekeeper answers the door, and she's this large African-American woman who cleans the house and waits on these people hand and foot," Ms. Young said. "And it's not that they treat her like a slave, but it's definitely that an African-American woman is their maid and full-time hands-on assistant. This was not the only house that that's still happening in. I was a little dumbfounded but also intrigued. I knew I wanted to do something about my mom's family."

Ms. Young is not interested in documenting Washington's actual life but in reframing it through her lens of pop songs, explicit sex scenes, monologues, and tap

dances. "I think my work is very much about dissolving expectations," she said, adding later, "I'm just taking the good and bad of people — and all the in between — throwing it up in the air and putting it back together in my own way."

For Ms. Lewis, who is also a choreographer, performing with Ms. Young is a fascinating exercise in what it means to have no boundaries.

"Her work makes me aware that performance is something I hold very sacred and a free zone where anything goes," Ms. Lewis said. "I love that Ann Liv's work is irreverent and fun and crazy, but at the same time, when you're with her, there's a way that it becomes very formal. Even the sexual stuff. On the outside something that would appear to be strange, within the context of her universe, isn't."

That universe has its roots on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where Ms. Young grew up. After six months at the Laban Center for Movement and Dance in London, she transferred to Hollins University, a women's college in Roanoke, Va. Its rigorous dance program, led by Donna Faye Burchfield, has produced a number of provocative artists, like the choreographers Shani Nwando Ikerioha Collins and Jilian Peña, but so far none as singular as Ms. Young. Ms. Burchfield has called her the hardest-working student she ever met.

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Having a baby hasn't exactly softened Ms. Young's rigorous approach — not even a baby named Lovey. "It's weird," she said, laughing. "Sometimes I think, why did I name my baby that? But for some reason it suits her. When she was born, we thought she was punk-rock. She can pull it off."

The past year has been difficult, but not necessarily because of the strain of motherhood. Ms. Young, on the advice of an animal behaviorist and veterinarian, euthanized Elliot, one of her beloved pit bulls. She devoted four years to rehabilitating the aggressive dog.

"Letting go of him was a really intense thing for me because it was like letting go of a huge part of my work," she said. "It was horrible." She quietly started to sob. "I had to just make a choice. Elliot has taught me more than any human being has ever taught me, hands down. About patience and understanding."

Now that she is a young mother of "an amazing little monkey," Ms. Young contended that she was a little calmer. "But if anything, Lovey fuels my work," she said. "It helps me take more risks and to be wilder. I want her to see her mom doing what she loves, and I want her to see that I take it very seriously and that I work hard so that she'll have the confidence to do that too."

Ms. Young smiled, with a wicked twinkle in her eye. "Because it's pretty amazing that I make a living dressing up as George Washington and torturing Isabel."