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## INTERVIEW

### MIGUEL GUTIERREZ: POWERFUL PERSON

By Lindsay Howard



The Last Meadow. Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People. Photography by Eric McNatt.

Miguel Gutierrez, an active member of the New York dance scene since 2001, creates solo and group performances under the moniker Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People. He has collaborated with a variety of dancers, musicians and visual artists, including Ann Liv Young, Neal Medlyn, John Jasperse, and Alain Siffard. His work includes: *enter the seen* (2002), *I succumb* (2003), *RAMNATION ROAD* (2004), *Retrospective Exhibitionist and Difficult Bodies* (2005), *myendlesslove* (2006), *Everyone* (2007), *Nothing, No thing, and freedom of information* (2008). He teaches regularly around the world and is the inventor of DEEP AEROBICS, "the communal/political/conceptual/imagination workout experience you always wanted but never could embarrass yourself enough to find or do in public." The world premiere of his most recent work, *Last Meadow*, which features company members Michelle Boule and Tarek Halaby, took place at the Time-Based Arts festival in Portland, Oregon where I sat down with him on a park bench to discuss his career, his audiences, and how he knows when someone's got enough power to become one of his Powerful People.

**Lindsay Howard:** You don't have a Wikipedia page.

**Miguel Gutierrez:** I know! Isn't that funny? My friend Christine was like, "You need a Wikipedia page!" but I'm not going to be the person who writes it, that would feel weird.

**LH:** When and where were you born?

**MG:** I was born in 1971 in New York City, in Queens. My parents are from Colombia, South America.

**LH:** Were your parents creative people? Dancers?

**MG:** No, no! Well, they're social dancers. My mom studied to be a draftsman. My dad studied to be an engineer. He has a lot of artistic gifts. I think he would've loved to have been a singer. He has a pretty voice. When I was growing up, he would sit down at the piano and just start playing music. He went through a phase of drawing. They both have skills. My mother was a draftsman—did I already say that?—I don't know how she got into it; she must've been drawing when she was younger. But it wasn't something that they pursued super strongly. It was a surprise to them when I wanted to go into dance/performance. They didn't have a frame of reference for dance as a profession, although I don't know why because they took me to see operas and what did they think those people did? Like, volunteer their services? The immigrant dream is not that you move to another country and your child becomes an artist. It's that you go somewhere and your child becomes a professional in a more traditional sense. But that's all worked out now.

**LH:** When did you make the decision that you would be a professional artist?

**MG:** It came in stages. I started studying dance when I was 9. There were two points of reference: ballet (which I studied for a long time but never seemed to be my form) and Broadway, which was the more likely route. First, I had this idea of myself as a Triple Threat. A possible triple threat. I remember in middle school, I wanted to go to a performing arts high school. I was already going to a fancy private school but I really wanted to go to performing arts high school. It was a huge fight with my parents that didn't go anywhere... I didn't get to go to performing arts high school. At that point, I had already made some kind of commitment to myself. It was very self-driven, self-motivated.

When I got to college, I went for a year, did performance projects, dance and theater, and then I dropped out of school to do gay activist stuff in San Francisco. That was when I first took modern and contemporary dance class. When I came back, I started dancing with a choreographer in Rhode Island and that was the first time I received strong external confirmation that I could be a dancer. I remember asking her, "Do you think I could do this?" and she was like, "Well, yeah, but you just need to go to a different school, this is not the right school to go to."

**LH:** Where were you going to school?

**MG:** I was going to Brown. I exhausted my dance options by the end of my second year there, so I transferred to Tisch NYU for the dance program. I went there for a year and then I dropped out of school again. I never finished school. There were stages of being really young and wanting to dance, going to school, and then going to college. The one time I can really, really strongly remember thinking "Okay, this is going to happen" is the year when I was living in San Francisco, when I was 17, I saw Joe Goode Performance Group. I remember after seeing that show, I was completely and totally electrified. I was like, "I have to go back to school. This is what I have to do. This is the thing I have to be doing." I felt it so totally clearly. I had probably felt it before but this was the most... It was a "birth of the rest of my life" kind of a moment.

**LH:** Who did you look to for inspiration, as a dancer and as a human, when you were growing up?

**MG:** I was very in awe of my sister, who is not a dancer but she's really smart and funny. I definitely had the little brother, wide-eyed looking at my sister like, "Oh she's so smart and pretty-she can do anything!" I really admired her a lot. I lived in such an intense little world of fantasy. I don't know that I had any particular person—I mean there were different people at different times.

I would do this thing where I would fantasize that I would become the best at something. I would go into these really elaborate fantasies of becoming, like, the best ping pong player or the best dart player and I would imagine myself on talk shows as the World Champion Dart Player on Johnny Carson. In my head, I would play out this full fantasy of myself becoming the best and then toppling from that position and then being a washed-up ping pong player. [laughs] It was a very complete trajectory.

Dance-wise, I think part of the problem was that I didn't have role models. I mean, there was Barishnikov but I didn't really know who other male dancers were. I didn't know about modern and contemporary dance forms, certainly not while I was in high school.

One of the early things that really struck me was when a friend of mine, when I was like 13, gave me an audio cassette tape of Meredith Monk and Laurie Anderson and that was the first time I had a really strong sense of the world of performance and art that existed beyond the scope of what I was being presented. Music was a big thing. I, of course, had tons of pop heroes like any young person has.

It wasn't really until I was in my college years that I began to really identify my real heroes and my real ancestors in terms of what I do now. A lot of that was self-motivated and self-discovered. For instance, the whole Judson Church movement which I came across when I was at Brown right before I went back for my second year, seeing Joe Goode was a huge turning point, seeing a lot while working in San Francisco like Keith Hennessy, Jules Beckman, Sara Shelton Mann's work, Ricky Darnell... seeing these other people's work and then I became voracious about uncovering 20th century dance history. That was when I started to consume that information and develop a relationship to the different figures in the past but even then there was nobody in the moment I knew who I thought, "Oh I want to be that person," except Joe Goode. Seeing him made me think, "Oh this person is doing all these things I want to do with movement, singing and sound." His work resembled what I thought I would've been doing when I was

growing up, without all the cheesiness of Broadway.

It's funny because now I have tons of heroes who I admire, who I feel influenced by. Not just performance people, but all kinds of people. When you're younger you're so into your thing....

It was also the case that my education was all over the map. There was never one idea presented as the thing that I was striving toward and because my parents and I had such a struggle with each other around my interest in dance, I very much created my own goals. The goals I had were very much self-created and very abstract because I really didn't know what I wanted.

I'm always so shocked now by kids who take my class who are really direct and clear about being interested in knowing about the work that I'm making because I think, "Wow, I never had the courage or really the where-with-all to do that with my teachers when I was younger." Maybe with my jazz and gymnastics teacher when I was really young I might have had that kind of relationship but nobody else, really, until much later in my life. I think that was partly about not knowing who to go to and also my own fear of approaching people in general, just fear of people and then just also fear of asking for what I wanted/needed.

LH: What drew you out to San Francisco?

MG: Well, my sister moved there when I was 17 and so I would go visit her. Then the whole "coming out" thing.

LH: You came out when you were 17?

MG: Yeah. My high school graduation present from my sister was to fly out there for the whole summer and that was, of course, life changing. And then I went out there after my freshman year of school. It was ostensibly originally to go to New Pacific Academy, which was a gay activist training program. Right after that Queer Nation San Francisco formed. I got pretty heavily involved with them and direct action stuff in San Francisco. I decided to go back to school and I felt really passionate about that stuff. San Francisco was far from where I had grown up, so it felt symbolic on that front although I don't know if I was conscious of that at the time but it was very much a factor in my actions. I needed to be far away from my parents, from my background somehow. San Francisco is a city of reinvention. It's a place where you go and you reformulate who you are, which is probably closer to who you actually are. San Francisco has always had that quality.

LH: What kind of classes are you teaching now? What are your goals as a teacher?

MG: I've been teaching for a really long time. I started teaching when I was 14 because I would assist my gymnastics teacher. I taught Jazz for a year when I was 16. I taught when I was in college. I was a substitute teacher for the professors which was a little shady on their part. I think. Here I am paying to go to school and I'm the one teaching the class! Soon after I moved to San Francisco, I started dancing for Joe, I started teaching kind of what his work is—he encouraged me to do that. All of those were mostly technique-based classes, right? I continued to do that for a long time—jazz to modern-y dance class, like what Joe taught, to whatever the hell it is that I teach now in technique class, which is really a combination of all these different practices I've studied or have been inside of, a general ethos of dance training that is in the world, in performance. I started teaching improvisation classes.

I used to have a live-work space in Brooklyn. I suddenly realized that I wanted to do workshops in topics that I didn't really know that much about. I thought, "I don't really know much about improvisation, so let me try to teach it." So I would force myself. Through teaching, you discover what you believe and so I just tried to organize workshops to try out ideas, sort of see how I would do these things that I felt were unteachable. Like improvisation which feels kind of unteachable, so I thought, "Okay, let me try to teach it then" or lead a group of people inside an exploration of it. I did the same thing with composition. I remember there came a moment when I realized there were a lot of young people in New York and I thought it was strange that you could go to a dance technique class every day but you can't go to a composition class every day. I lead these workshops which came from this principle of "Here's a thing that's impossible to teach". How do you teach somebody how to make a piece? You can't. It was exciting to try to uncover strategies for that process. Since then, there've been workshops that have mixed and matched all those things, which are reflective of process in terms of what I'm making or I'll borrow from techniques I've used to make projects or are a deconstruction of the workshop process. There's one workshop I taught called "The Big Mess", which was literally that, which was an attempt to teach a workshop where I don't really lead, where I instigate and I don't really teach but I direct. The last few workshops I've taught have been called "Ready For Anything" which is an improvisation-based exploration workshop with vocal work and sensation work to sort of trick yourself out of your own patterns and habits as an explorer of movement, or maker of movement. It runs the gamut.

I started teaching DEEP Aerobics two years ago, which is this ridiculous thing called Death Electric Emo Protest Aerobics and that came out of wanting to explore aerobics as a sort of absurdist and political operation. That's been really fun. I've done it a lot since though not super regularly. I teach technique still and I think my technique class is pretty traditional in its design: a warm-up, a phrase. I feel like, essentially, in a technique class what I'm teaching is a life coach philosophy class. I think that with technique, yeah, I can really talk about how you move from one leg to another and how you stand this way or how you shift yourself through space but I think a lot of what you're dealing with when you're teaching a technique class, when you're seeing people move, is you're dealing with psychological patterns and the ways that people think about themselves as people and as performers, so you're uncovering that and you're trying to give them access to other ways of perceiving themselves. You can talk about balancing as a mechanical action of standing on a leg but you can also think about it as a psychological operation of fearlessness, a kind of entry into a void. For me, all these actions have direct, metaphorical analogues. In an ideal situation, I can get into that kind of language and that kind of discussion because a lot of what I see when people dance, sure it's their movement but really what I'm seeing is how they think about what they're doing or how I think how they think they're doing it. That's what I try to tackle and push and shape.

LH: You performed non-stop for 24 hours in *Freedom of Information* 2008. There's a connection between that piece and DEEP aerobics or even the Madonna scene in *Last Meadow*, where you push your body to its physical limit, toward exhaustion. The phrase "endurance art" comes to mind. What do you find in yourself when you're in that place? What keeps you coming back?

MG: I wish I could stop going back to it—I'm over it! *(laughter)*

There's something very basic about action that goes on longer than it's expected it can go on for, being an opportunity to uncover the artifice that is being deployed and also a potential site of transcendence. One of the huge themes in my work is the binary, which I find is a false binary or one that I've imposed upon it, of the banal body and the transcendent body. Contending with emotions that feel bigger than the body that contains them. Those expressions of endurance are often me pressing up against the frustration or the reality of what my boundaries and limitations are. At the same time, acknowledging that even when I think I've reached a boundary, there's often more there than I've realized. The body is surprising. Obviously, or people wouldn't do things like Iron Man Triathlons. You hear about heroic feats all the time.

But, for me, heroism and performance is not about "I'm beautiful and let me show you how beautiful I am," which is a very traditional, conventional approach to heroism. It's about saying "This thing is breaking down but I'm going to try it anyway. I'm going to persist beyond the place of it staying pretty or being coherent because we're not coherent. We're not pretty. We are multiple bodies. Our beauty rests right alongside our ugliness. Our desire rests right along our acceptance. Our power rests right alongside our vulnerability." It's only through time, or an experience of time, that you can really live with that acknowledgement.

Also, when the body has to engage a real task that demands something else from it, something else is accessed. You tap into something inside of you that you would not have gotten to any other way. Often I think in the work that I do like DEEP aerobics and *Freedom of Information*, that sense of endurance and pushing taps into some notion of community as support system, or the community as the context inside of which you go beyond yourself. There's a sense that if we're together, we can get through this thing.

Certainly in *Last Meadow*, in the Madonna section, there's me, Tarek and Michelle supporting each other in the lunacy of this fucking stupid, ridiculous dance that will not resolve itself, which is a direct analogue to living, obviously. What is the meaning of life? Who fucking knows! All we know is: we're here and we're stuck with each other. We can either resist that or say, "Okay, I'm doing this thing and I don't really understand WHY" and it can be snuffed out at a moment's notice and for some reason you and I are sitting in this park and having this lovely conversation and for some reason while doing this somebody in Afghanistan is huddled in a house wondering when they're going to be fucking hit by a missile. Both of those things exist temporally in the same place. We're not better than that person. I like the moments when the body has to contend with its own ability to be present and also communal and also universal and also singular. It's all these different—I don't want to say representations—perceptions of itself. Action can be an effective means to that. It's not the only one but for me it's the one that I articulate, it's the one that is manifested in what I do.

I think it's also very seminal. It's an articulation of a very early relationship to the body about pleasure and resistance. Let me feel myself as myself through movement, through ecstatic movement, through an articulation of the ecstatic body. When I was young, my sister and I would improvise together on Friday nights to pop music and it was the most glorious experience for me as a young queer kid. I wanted to disappear and surrender into the power of my feelings. Those feelings seemed enormous, much, much larger than my world at the time. That was really exquisite for me. Now my boundary is bigger—my boundary is the theater or my boundary is the world, or the boundary is my age, or the boundary is my idea of other people's perceptions. The container has multiple forms but I find that I'm always rubbing right up against it and looking for the worm-hole, or a way through this into something else.

LH: Where is your audience in this process?

MG: I feel that the audience is the witness, the reason why the work is able to be heightened to a certain level.

LH: So the audience helps you?

MG: Yeah, very much, for me, they help a lot whether they want to be there. A lot of times people don't want to be there and that's fine. I create a situation where I almost fanatically want people's commitment and demand their attention. I am very aggressive in that way.

Really, honestly, totally underneath that, the underbelly of all that desire is: love, a sense of real love and giving. I want to give this thing to you but, of course, I very fiercely want you to want it. It's an imbalance. Performance is not an equitable contract. It's a strange contract. You can choose to approach it in multiple ways.

There are times when the audience is cruel. You can feel it, that context of "I am here and you are making decisions about me" and that feels cruel. Then there are times when the audience feels invitational and open. Sometimes when you think you're creating an open space, people feel alienated and vice versa. I've lost a sense of understanding what it is that people assume equals intimacy.

I recently saw a performance where it was super folksy and the person was talking to us and I felt super UGH! [hands

up) GE: I AWAY FROM ME! Give me some fucking distance from where I can actually enter! The artist thought I was entering because they created this invitation but in fact it made me feel super pushed away. Who can know what a limitation actually looks and feels like?

I do feel that I construct my work so that there can be an invitation. I do believe that that's there but it's not going to be there for everybody. How could it be? It'd be an impossible task. It would also be dumb for me to assume that I could know what that is for everybody. Performance is fucking weird. You could be in a fucking pissy mood because your girlfriend just said "Fuck you" before you went into the theater or you didn't eat that day or you had a bad day at work or you left your cell phone on or your baby's sick or ... there are so many contingencies. How can I possibly create something that would be a balm, or a salve against all those individual realities? I try! Fuck, man, do fucking try, but I know that I can't. The audience is there. In my heart, they're there. I'm always conscious of the idea that this is going to be something that is shared and communicated. But, yeah, the terms are mine (*laughter*) and I know, too!

It's a weird space. It's not like coming to the park. It's not communal space. It borrows from communal forms, from social situations but it's weird to sit in the theater and plant your ass down for ninety minutes, to observe and to potentially interact. It's not normal, but I like that it's not normal. I like that it's a special coded time. There's something you can do in that. I like the privacy of sitting in a theater, personally, even when I'm surrounded by people, I like that. There's so much talk about like "How do we get people out of the theater and into different spaces?" but for me, the theater isn't the problem per se, it depends on the piece. I actually feel it's increasingly rare to find private, focused time, so I like that there's a time when you get to say, "Please shut off your phone and pay attention for this much time" as a practice for fuck's sake. It's a way of honoring that much luxurious time inside of your own imagination. In the best of situations, that's actually pretty fucking rare.

LH: How did you find and go about hiring the Powerful People?

MG: They're a rotating cast of characters, although Michelle and Tarek were both involved in the original conception in 2001.

We all met in different ways. For our first group piece, "enter the seen" in 2002, I used Anna who was someone I knew from Tisch, my friend Abby who I knew from Brown, Michelle who I had met in New York, Tarek who I met during my first summer teaching at the American Dance Festival. It was just intuitive. It was: people I like, (*laughter*) people who I like to have in the studio, people who I trust, and people who border the line of friend and performer. They were all people who had, at some moment, taken my breath away somehow, like, (*gasp*). I really admire that. They are able to do something that I can't do, so I want them around. That was true later when I expanded the group for "Everyone" which we performed in 2007. There have been people who have come in and replaced people for projects.

Michelle and Tarek are intensely skilled dancers, they are really, really good, but that's not even what the piece shows about them. We're not doing super fancy phrases. I mean, they're fancy but not in the way that a lot of contemporary American dances reveal themselves.

I like people who can really push it out, who really go for it, who push past their own boundaries. I like people who have strong independent practices either as creators or as body-based people. I don't teach a "company class". I like people who can agree and move along with the process but who can also stop and ask interesting questions. It's a real alchemy.

There are some qualities as a director which are very evaluative, you want a certain thing or expect a certain standard - oh, I hate that word - a certain level of commitment, like, I don't like lazy people. They bum me out. I don't like people who pretend they can do things that they can't do. I'd much rather have someone be clear about things they can't do but then fucking try it anyway. I get really bored with people who are afraid in that way because I'm not afraid. I get impatient with people who need to take up a lot of psychic space without reason. I like big personalities, for sure. But, people whose insecurities just become about "I have to own the process". I want to tell them to work it out somewhere else. I haven't really worked with people like that so much. There have been glimpses of that in different moments, in different pieces.

I think you offer the best of yourself when you feel safe and you can offer risky things about yourself when you feel safe. It's important to me to create an encouraging, yet demanding space. It was funny early on to even name the group ["The Powerful People"]. Inside of that name, there's the implication that we're all powerful, which I do believe. I guess it's a vestige of the political work I did when I was younger or a basic, spiritual acknowledgement of individual beauty. If you really look at person, if you really deal with them, you can find something powerful, beautiful, or special in them. The world does not often set us up for seeing each other that way. There's something in the construction of the process that for me is about inviting that possibility in.

Last *Meadow* premieres in New York this week, September 15-19, at Dance Theater Workshop: [www.dtw.org](http://www.dtw.org).