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Justice, not visibility: Alok Vaid-Menon

BY CRYSTAL LIU **JULY 31, 2017**

PHOTO BY SINHEAD CUFFE

Texas-raised, gender-nonconforming, and an unapologetically fashionable poet and performance artist, Alok Vaid-Menon first rose to prominence in 2013 as one-half of poetry power duo DarkMatter. After touring internationally and becoming celebrated in both the queer/trans and spoken word communities, DarkMatter was put to rest in early 2017. Alok (who uses they/them pronouns) has since

struck out on their own. They're now touring their solo work, a brutal mix of comedy and poetry that addresses racism and transmisogyny in our digital world. Their new show **WATCHING U / WATCH ME** arrives in Berlin on August 6 at the Werkstatt der Kulturen. You can also catch their piece **FEMME IN PUBLIC** at Humboldt University on August 7.

WATCHING U / WATCH ME is about visibility, surveillance, and power. Have you found it a difficult topic to explore?

It's a charged subject, because people still have this really uncritical idea that you *want* to be watched. People think that trans visibility means trans justice – that making trans people visible is the goal. But, there's also a really disturbing part to this that I'm trying to work through – the sinister forms of visibility. And that, people are just really not... *receptive* to. I have to do a lot of provocation and pushing, to be like, do you know what it's like to feel surveilled every moment of your life? To have people pick apart your body offline and online, to constantly be stared at? Do you realize the psychological condition that that forces on you?

Why are people resistant?

Because I think there's still a hierarchy where we understand physical violence as the only real form of violence. In one of the poems from the show, I say, "The most lethal part of the human body is the eye, not the fist." I'm basically trying to get across that many gender non-conforming people like me have been harassed so much in our lives that sometimes we don't even need to be touched to *feel* touched.

That's how trauma works. People are very much looking for, "How does that manifest?" And I'm like, why do fear and trauma have to be visible? Can we understand the condition of being watched as a traumatizing condition? I'm trying to create the language to understand this condition that women and trans people know so intimately – of feeling objectified, of feeling sexualized, of feeling used – even without anyone touching you.

How does all of this fit into your role as a public figure?

I always joke at my shows, "When a man is chasing me home, I try to say, 'I have this many number of Instagram followers!' Nothing changes. He still chases me home." People seem to think that just because I have access to visibility, that violence in my life has stopped. And this just could not be farther from the truth. Already, so much of transphobia is scrutiny of our bodies. Compound that with being a public figure, and it's 10 times the scrutiny. But then on top of that, I'm now also getting hundreds of rape and death threats. And *that* is something I did not anticipate. I don't even know how to strategise around it. I'm often the first visibly gender non-conforming person that many people have ever seen, which means that I experience the brunt of their fascination and indignation.

Why does this happen? How do we stop it?

We expect women and trans people to be grateful and perpetually apologetic for having access to a platform. We're not allowed to say, "This is also hurting me." That's what I'm trying to work through in this new

show. What does it mean to be told to die on the street? To post about it online, and to be told to die *10 more times*? How do I develop a relationship with my mental health that allows me the self-confidence and stamina to be able to look at all this hate and be like, "Oh, it's okay." Often it's *not* okay. What we need is not visibility, it's justice. It's much easier to put women and trans people on a stage than it is to fund and support women and trans people, to pay for our healthcare, to pay for our car rides, to pay for our safety. It's easier to put the onus on trans people to be visible and it's much harder say, "Let's end patriarchal binary to begin with."

Is there anything you know now that you wish you'd known before you started?

Yeah. I think the biggest one is how important it is to have a sense of who you are outside of all the noise. One of the strangest turn of events in my life has been my rekindling of friendships from high school with all these cis white Texans who I never thought I would keep in my life. They've become such big rocks of support for me, because they constantly remind me, "This is who you are. You're not this person, you're this." That's been grounding and profound and therapeutic, to recognize that I am that same girl/boy/neither. That it doesn't matter that all these things are changing in my life, I still have that core sense of who I am.

I also feel like part of that sense of self involves having a writing practice that's just for me and not for public consumption. Because the nature of my work is so personal, often when I experience violence, the first reaction is, let me write a poem about it for the

public. I wish that I'd known that it's not just acceptable, but it's so radical and wonderful and beautiful to have a self-writing practice. This is what I'm telling so many trans people I meet everywhere. You need to have an intimate relationship with yourself, first and foremost. It's important to know who you are through your own writing before you put it out there.

You're now based in New York. Why?

When I moved to New York I began to meet my people. One of my favorite stories to tell about New York is that I was walking down the street and a trans Latina woman came up to me and said, "Do you know how to fight?" I said, "What do you mean?" and she said, "Well if you're going to dress like that in New York, you need to learn how to fight." And she took me to a YMCA and taught me how to box. Like, that type of mentorship, family, support with transfeminine people, I had never experienced anywhere in my life. That's why even though New York is such a site of harassment and violence for me, it's also a really important site of community. It's the first time in my life that I met other trans people of colour who made me feel like what I was was real, legitimate, historical, political. That was so important and validating, because of the lessons and relationships and histories that I didn't get in Texas, that I didn't get in college, that I don't really get mostly anywhere in the world.

How do you incorporate education into your work?

When I was in Berlin a couple of weeks ago, I

facilitated a class at a local art school [Weissensee Academy]. That was so fun for me. I joke that I'm the brown trans Ms. Frizzle – I'm standing on top of tables wearing zany outfits, I'm crying, screaming. And I just love teaching, because knowledge has been so liberating in my life. That's why I use performance to teach people all the time. And why reading is central to my performance practice. I like the fusion of performance and pedagogy – performance makes learning fun again, and dynamic and emotional. I remember taking classes and learning about the colonisation of my ancestors, and we would say it so unemotionally, like it was just some fact in a book. These were real people who look like me! In performance I'm allowed to cry while talking about that. So I see performance as a way of feeling history, feeling knowledge. They're really intertwined for me now. And I *am* an educator. It feels good to say that, to own that identity.

**WATCHING U / WATCH ME, Aug 6, 19:00 |
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BY CRYSTAL LIU JULY 31, 2017

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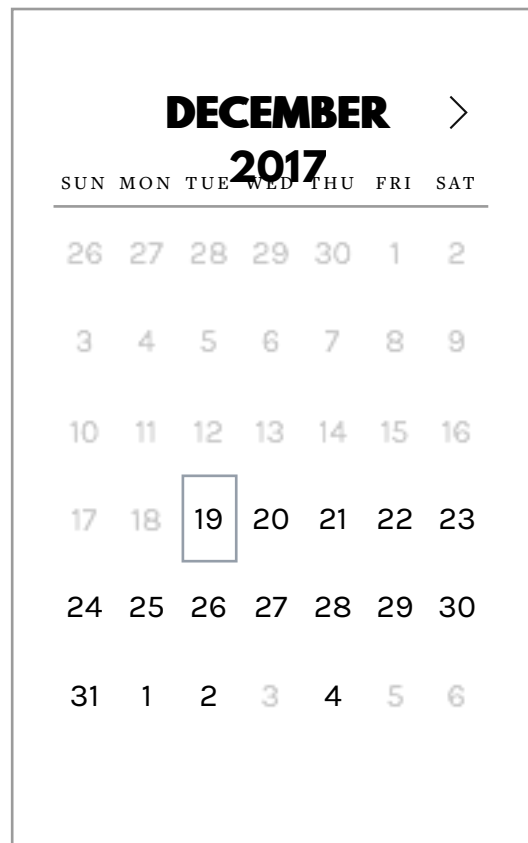
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