

MERRY JANE

From the Dance Floor to the White Cube: A Conversation with Artist Richard Kennedy

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Photo by Eric Johnson

"I'm a black queer man, and I do what I fucking want," says the multidisciplinary artist, dancer, and musician.

For young artists, New York nightlife can be as treacherous as it is electrifying, a dangerous game of chutes and ladders. Multidisciplinary artist Richard Kennedy knows this all too well, having emerged from the thicket wise, focused, and, for the most part, unscathed. With a career winding from *Wicked*'s Broadway stage, to partying at Lady Gaga's LES haunts, to gracing the pages of *Artforum*, Kennedy has risen to become an integral part of Brooklyn's avant art scene without pigeonholing himself to one craft. His productivity reached new heights last year after releasing his first solo EP, *Open Wound in a Pool of Sharks*, while simultaneously working toward an MFA from Bard, writing two operas, and curating numerous performance events.

The artist and I originally met in January 2012 at the opening of then-hotspot W.I.P. (the Soho club eventually known for Chris Brown and Drake's bloody Rihanna battle). After deciding the dayglow event was boring, we locked eyes and smashed our tumblers full of vodka and cheap cranberry juice on the ground. We've been friends ever since. Witty, strong, and hilarious, Kennedy is an ever-relevant talent who is bound to become an icon. Over FaceTime, we discussed his journey from party boy to working artist as he hit a spliff.

MERRY JANE: You began your career studying dance at Pittsburg's Point Park University. What was that like?

Richard Kennedy: My experience at Point Park was great in a lot of ways, but I only developed as a dancer, not a person. Everyone's dreams were so similar, I felt like a big fish in a small pond. Since I was on a full musical theater and dance scholarship, I had to audition for fucking everything. My first day of school they were singing "Seasons of Love." I knew it was never going to work.

After leaving Point Park, you toured the country extensively with the Broadway smash *Wicked*, a dream for many. Why did you walk away? Ultimately, none of it was satisfying. At this point, I'd toured every state doing *Fosse*, *Westside Story*, and was in *Wicked*. I'd just turned 24. I knew I couldn't do it for the rest of my life, and wanted control over my career. I thought, I'm a black dancer with a strong personality. I'm an

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Photo by Jimmy Tagliaferri

individual. This isn't the industry for me, they're just going to bury me. It was my time to move on, but I was making so much money my family couldn't understand what I was doing. The day Michael Jackson died I got injured, and took it as a sign.

MJ: Were you involved in nightlife at this point? When did you discover the more artistic side of NY nightlife?

RK: In 2011, I danced for SSION in their MOMA PS1 show. Early Mykki Blanco, Sky Ferreira, and Colin Self also performed. I was coming out of a year of physical therapy kind of a mess, a shell of a person. It was a turning point for me, the year I moved to Brooklyn, from a club space to a gallery space. I began meeting the art/fashion side of nightlife, and was like, Holy shit, this is the scene I've been looking for.

After Wicked, I moved to Harlem and started hanging out downtown. I wasn't hosting parties and stuff yet, but that's why I came to the city. I changed my name to Richard Kennedy, and started fresh. I'd met a performer named Breedlove who worked as a makeup artist on Wicked by day, and performed downtown with Lady Gaga at night. He was good friends with her, so I got caught in her whole Lower East Side wave as she was becoming famous.

I met [nightlife impresarios] Lady Fag and Contessa Stuto shortly after, and they both started looking out for me, inviting me to parties. Contessa saw me perform and thought I was really talented. That was at my most club kid. I had a super goth vibe going for a minute. I remember Contessa said, "Your look is cunt chic realness. If you keep this up, you're just another kid in a costume." I took her advice, scaled that look back, and started hosting their parties.

MJ: On top of working towards an MFA at Bard, you released your first EP, curated several festivals, and wrote multiple operas in the past couple years. What sparked this urgency to create in a more serious and prolific way?

RK: It was that concert we went to [MusiCares Songwriters Benefit Concert] when you were covering the Grammys a few years ago. Seeing all those amazing songwriters and artists perform that night made me realize that I could be successful, that this was my world. I was going through a breakup, hanging out all night with people who weren't inspiring me. And I escaped that. I realized I didn't move from Ohio and go through all these transitions to waste time in New York. You can only repeat the same thing so many times before you realize maybe you're the problem, and address the patterns in your life.

MJ: Can you talk about the importance of asserting yourself when trying to be taken seriously as an artist?

RK: After leaving Wicked, I went from making over \$100,000 a year to being paid nothing. People would offer me \$50 or \$100 to perform, acting like it was a favor. Most importantly, the work just has to be there. You have to articulate yourself in the language of money talks, value yourself, and show up. You can't be an unreliable party boy asking for a ton of money. They're expecting you to show up, show out, and that's totally fair. I realized the the only thing that people can't take away from you is knowledge and education. I need to give myself security. I'm a black queer man, and I do what I fucking want. It'd be foolish to spiral down some weird party path. I think the most punk thing I could be in Trump's America is successful, eloquent, and put together.