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Ballet Kink at the Guggenheim

Brendan Fernandes drills dancers in rope bondage and consent for the museum's Young Collectors Party.

By Betsy Morais

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"I'm thinking about the dynamics of power," Brendan Fernandes, an artist, said the other day, on the Upper East Side. He is thirty-nine, with a shaved head, a trimmed beard, and an industrial earring that runs across the top of his left ear like a curtain rod. He wore a sweatshirt that read "Reigning Champ." Fernandes, a former dancer, was about to headline the Young Collectors Party, at the [Guggenheim](#), and had been given license to put on "performative interventions" with the theme "ballet kink." The casting call was for "authoritative bodies." Dancers would also have to be trained in ballet and O.K. with rope bondage.

Tickets were selling for two hundred and fifty dollars. "When I was a young dancer, we would be at the barre and développ   our legs up, and the teacher would sometimes bring a flame underneath," Fernandes recalled. "If you bring a leg down, you get burnt!" That's power, he'd thought. "We call our teachers ballet masters." That's kind of kinky, he'd considered. After college, two of his dancer friends became dominatrices. "There is pain in ballet, but there is also pleasure," he'd concluded. This was on his mind when the Guggenheim called.

Fernandes was born in Nairobi. His family emigrated when he was nine ("It wasn't a safe place at that point"), settling in the suburbs of Toronto. He was Mr. Mistoffelees in "Cats" and then got into ballet and punk rock. "I danced all the way through college," he said. But he injured his hamstring: "I had to leave ballet." He got a master's degree, moved around a lot, and kept making art. His recent work includes "[Emergency Rave](#)," an homage to those who lost their lives in the Pulse night-club shooting, in Orlando, and "[The Master and Form](#)," in which dancers hold ballet poses on metal structures—that one he's putting on anew for the Whitney Biennial. Then he's off to the Smithsonian, M.C.A. Chicago, and the Noguchi Museum, where his dancers will have to sit perfectly still in rocking chairs.

Before the party, Fernandes arrived at the Guggenheim to meet the nine dancers he'd recruited. He wouldn't give them choreography so much as patterns and ideas. The ballet world, like everywhere, is still reckoning with sex scandals in its institutions, some of which his collaborators had danced for. Might this performance objectify their

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bodies? “This piece is about creating empowerment,” Fernandes said. The key to kink is consent, he explained. “I’m a really nice master.”

The group gathered in a circle. On either side of Fernandes sat a big guy, Vincent Tiley, wearing military boots, and a small guy, Ming Chang, dressed in a black T-shirt. They were the rope-bondage aficionados. Fernandes’s plan was to dress each dancer in a decorative harness, then constrict the men and suspend them one at a time from a truss while the female dancers bourréed and slinked around. “I want you to think, How do I create freedom if I don’t have that body part to move?” he said. The dancers nodded. “If you think, I don’t want to be tied up anymore, talk to Vincent.”

“I just want to say a few things about rope?” Chang interjected. “What I want to emphasize is safety. So, whatever you do, don’t go around the neck with the rope.” The dancers nodded.

“Who wants to be first?” Fernandes asked.

Nico Brown, a dancer with a mustache, raised his hand: “Ohmigod.”

“Nico’s first,” Fernandes said.