’I’m just performing what people expect from me, so that I can literally get a break.’

July 13, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Stephen Winter’s latest film, Jason and Shirley, recently premiered at BAMcinemaFest with praise from The New Yorker and The New York Times. Jason and Shirley stars Visual AIDS artist member Jack Waters as Jason Holliday and Peter Cramer as the Matron, and was produced by fellow artist member Bizzy Barefoot.

The film is a critical reimagining of Shirley Clarke’s 1967 cinema verité film Portrait of Jason, which delicately hovers between candid documentary and exploitative interrogation. At the time, it offered an unprecedented look at the experience of race, class, and sexuality in America. Her subject, Jason Holliday, is a black, gay hustler who flamboyantly recounts his colorful life to the camera in the manner of a cabaret performer--long, raucous belly laughs, snaps, and his trademark catchphrase, “I’ll never tell.” In an attempt to capture the raw Jason beneath his nonstop performance, Shirley Clarke relentlessly questions and even insults him until he has crumbled and sobs into the camera.

Jason and Shirley is an attempt to fabulate what was going on behind the camera of Portrait of Jason. Shot in Super-VHS, the film follows Jason as he spars with Shirley (played by Sarah Schulman), makes passes at the sound boy, shoots heroin and drinks himself into oblivion. Jason and Shirley doesn’t offer a didactic critique of Clarke’s film but rather enriches it by elaborating on the multiplicity of truths present and by bringing Clarke out from behind the camera.

Former Visual AIDS intern Kyle Croft sat down with Waters and Barefoot to discuss the film after a recent screening in San Francisco.

I’m curious what your first experiences of Portrait of Jason were. Jack, you mentioned that the first time you saw Portrait of Jason was when it screened at the MIX Experimental Film Festival in 1989, alongside Looking for Langston and Tongues Untied as part of a program on black gay men. Can you talk about that experience?
Waters: At the time, Portrait of Jason did not represent the goals of queer culture or black culture, because we were still moving toward this direction of wanting to be like everyone else. It’s the Mattachine syndrome, where conformity is seen as being equal. Conformity and equality are convoluted.

Black people didn't want to touch it, and a part of that nonconformity had to do with the fact that he's gay, which was another taboo with a lot of communities of color where queerness is seen as white decadence, as some kind of infection of colonialism or something. And then queer people didn't want it because he's overtly femme, he's a hustler, he's not likable.

I must have been watching the film and I must have been rejecting it. Because I know in subsequent screenings, I was always like "Ew, what is this? This is nasty." It was always focused at Jason.

Barefoot: Not at Shirley.

Waters: Right, it's an uncanny piece that way because she keeps herself out of it enough that she's not incriminated by that kind of mentality.

Barefoot: She's almost sly. He's in your face and she's really insidious.

Bizzy, can you talk about your first experience of the film and how that evolved into this project?
Barefoot: My friend Econ was sampling the film in his work, in his DJ sets. Jason has an incredible voice, as soon as you hear it you're like, "What?! Who could this possibly be?" It's someone real and he obviously speaks from another time period. He's totally intriguing, and so faggy. And so Econ said, "You have to see this film," and we snuggled up and watched Portrait of Jason.

The project idea came less from Portrait of Jason itself than my desire to engage Jack Waters in some large performance event. The truth is that we originally talked about doing this as a live scenario. It was always true that we intended to include Shirley, but we were thinking small. We were thinking garden theater. That we would really deconstruct it. So we just started talking about it, laying around in the garden. [Jack Waters and Peter Cramer run Le Petit Versailles, a community garden on the Lower East Side.] The inspiration really came from one of Jack's characters, Jackie Kaye.

Waters: I had been doing these performances for years, like white face, basically. It was using models like Sammy Davis Jr., old-school show biz personas who broke into show business and were really successful, and they always presented in a white arena. So I developed this character, first it was Gil Scott-Heron. And there was a program at MIX, Snow Queens in 1995 which was guest curated by Cylena Simonds. It was about whiteness or blackness and so I showed up in white face, Jack B. White. I didn't tell anyone I was coming that way; I just showed up. I called it theatrical intervention. And I just spoke the way that I would but I adapted this character of someone who's obviously not white but trying to be white. Just to see what people thought.

Barefoot: To a certain degree, Jason presents this way.

Waters: Which was part of my revulsion. I didn't get it--Bizzy and Econ were like, "This is the role you were born to play." And even then, I was like, "What?! I'm not like that!" But it's part of the black experience, living in these multiple worlds. You're carrying all of these identities with you. So that really is the core and the nucleus of this project: Bizzy is seeing and feeling all of this and

knowing what that kind of identity trade is about.

Jack, your performance has garnered praise from The New Yorker and The New York Times. Can you talk a little bit about that, as an underground and experimental artist who often skirts the limelight?
Waters: People are like, “Oh, you’re famous, you’re a star now, this is your moment.” And my line is that I will accept that but I’m not buying it. And I mean that, because it also comes to what I feel are my core values, which is that everything can’t be bought and sold. And so this idea of fame and notoriety and attention is also an illusion. Because it’s a production, it’s a collaboration. And that film, and the character that I portray and the performance that I give, is the sum total of everything that I’m getting from everyone else.

So this idea of breaking into the mainstream or having a wider audience is great. And I’ve striven for this all my life. But at the same time I also know that there’s only so much truth and honesty that you can get from presenting to a mass public. It’s not the same as being able to be up against somebody’s body and looking into somebody’s eyes and feeling what you feel on an individual and a physical level.

How have audiences been receiving Jason and Shirley?
Barefoot: They were decidedly different experiences. Our family audience, our hometown advantage audience, was delirious. Part of that is because they love these people and they were excited. To me, it was a team of really experienced people coming together and I think it was a gamble--none of us had worked together. But our chemistry paid off; whether we had work experience with each other or not, we had chemistry.

Waters: We’ve had two public screenings now, one in New York and one in San Francisco, and one of the differences in reception that I noticed is that with the New York audience, we got a lot more belly laughs from the nigger jokes and the Jew jokes than in San Francisco. The laughter here [in San Francisco] was more nervous and more polite. “Oh my god, they actually said it. They went there.” In New York, they’re like, “Yeah yeah yeah, I tell these jokes all the time.”

Barefoot: I think that people feel broken by this film. And I don’t think breaking an audience is a terrible thing to do, because it’s asking you to employ empathy to things that we are still struggling to apply empathy to in our present climate. Having the experience of being broken is what makes you care about people who are in pain, who are broken. I think the New York audience feels that way too--it’s important that we acknowledge our community pain, our struggle.

Can you talk more about what your role was as producer, and on the set?
Barefoot: I think what makes me a producer is bringing the idea and specifically Jack to it. And helping Jack sort of get himself into his body and all these things. So I think of myself as a producer of various services. On the set, I was mostly getting people into costumes. And to talk about the set a little bit, the thing that felt most important to me was just that they feel like they’re trapped in this place that has the color and shapes and textures of the ’60s. Not to be some deep historically accurate piece. But just to put this colorful jail together, basically.

Shirley Clarke's Portrait of Jason was made in one marathon shoot, with Clarke relentlessly probing and prodding Jason until he breaks. She tries to capture his raw truth by working him until he is emotionally and physically exhausted. You've mentioned that Jason and Shirley was shot over one long weekend, with much of the script being developed situationally. I imagine that experience was similarly exhausting, especially for Jack. Did it ever feel like the project was slipping from a critique of exploitation into a reproduction of it?
Barefoot: Jack's interpretation and his intention for what we were doing was endurance performance. Jack has a line in the film, which to some degree is actually Jack speaking: "Getting a little lost in my reality here." Which isn't as much Jason speaking in that moment--they were in character for 16 hours. Lunch was done in character. It was the only meal in 16 hours.

Waters: At this point, I lost awareness. There are dummy cameras, which are in the film, then there are the actual cameras, and then there are extra cameras that are in all areas of the set, because that had been the original intention, to catch everything and to be potentially using them in this final cut. At that point, you know, you're not supposed to play to the camera, but I forgot which camera you're not supposed to play to.

Barefoot: Sarah, in real time, was convinced that our experiment was a failure. She said, We have another broken black man laying on the floor, broken by this system at work. And Jack was sort of over the edge and exhausted. Exhaustion is definitely a huge part of where the performances came from, particularly Jack's really emotional performance at the end. He had been filming the musical number for the first half of the day. So just his body was already having the honest experience of exhaustion. But to some degree we were bordering on getting unhealthy with our experiment. Sometimes the experiment takes a left turn and gets real and hard and deep.

Waters: So your raw emotions start to come out. And you just start behaving in an animal way. "This is all I have. Wanna see?" For us, we have nothing to lose. We do this all the time. Our lives are raw.

Barefoot: Broken--our lives are broken. And I think that speaks to what you're asking: Why is it important to have the experience of trying to break each other? In theater, it's important to address all of the emotions that we have, all of the experiences that we have, and a huge experience of being a human being, particularly a queer human being, or a black human being, is of being broken by people all of the time. So I think it's important to address. And I don't think we make it any better. I don't think we make breaking feel any better. I think we make it feel like being broken. But ultimately we have Jason seeming to be on top, not broken. And that's the other thing, resilience is super important to the dynamic.

Waters: Even though we have this collective experience, as a community, for each of us the stakes are different. So for me and Jason, our concept of being broken is completely different than Sarah's, and Bizzy's, and Peter's. So lying on the floor in a crumbled heap, just (seemingly) bereft of all emotion is, for me, not really breaking. I'm just performing what people expect from me, so that I can literally get a break.

Do you want to talk about any upcoming projects?
Waters: “Sunscreen Test Boulevard in the Sand,” the treasure trove tour of Cherry Grove. It’s a series of activities and performances in cooperation with Visual AIDS, New York Performing Arts Collective and the Fire Island Artist Residency. We’re doing a talk on July 30 and the performance will be on August 1.

There’s an element that’s going to be happening with characters and theater and drama that I’m not going to talk about on the record, but that’s going to begin immediately. And what we’re basically doing is encouraging audiences to be involved in it, not just at this culmination on Fire Island but leading up to it through the treasure hunt, for which the prize will be a new product which we have gotten a major pharmaceutical company, I think it is, to present--which is a combination of PrEP and amyl nitrates. We’re having copyright discussions right now, whether they’re going to be called Truvoppers or Preppers or what. We’re still playing with that. [laughs]

Barefoot: I’m not sure what’s next for me, actually. I’m doing an installation in Los Angeles, a floral installation. And I’m supposed to be writing a queer anthem for Quito Ziegler’s new movie, Wild Ponies.

Bizzy Barefoot is a radical queer, transgender artist, activist, communitarian and Faerie. Her 30-year artistic career has been evenly divided between performance and visual art. She has performed on hundreds of stages all around the United States, Canada and Europe, and has served as artistic director for the Pittsburgh Queer Theater Festival, and for two successful theater companies in Pittsburgh and NYC, of which she was also a co-founder. In addition she’s a longtime member of the critically acclaimed experimental performance group The Nerve Tank in NYC. As visual artist and activist, she has spent nine years working with MIX NYC, as an in-house venue designer for the last six. She’s also co-designed and built installations and puppets for the likes of Greenpeace, Pace University and the People’s Climate March, and has been featured in Vice and I.D. as well as in the Visuals AIDS anniversary exhibition at LaMaMa Galleria. She has worked as a stage, costume and media designer, window designer, and portrait artist. Her present focus is the powerful confluence of art making and community building, manifesting in the making of elaborate and immersive, community built TAZs (Temporary Autonomous Zones) in which queer community can deeply explore itself outside the critical and often punitive eye of heterosexual culture and the law. She holds degrees in theater and music. Jason and Shirley is her first major film project.

Known for his experimental cross-disciplinary multimedia works that encompass experimental, non-narrative, documentary and personal history strategies, Jack Waters brings broad-based knowledge and technical skills to practices of sociopolitical and cultural engagement responsive to issues of ethnic, sexual and gender identity, AIDS activism, and archival histories using the mediums of photography, film and video, installation, and performance to engage and develop ideas that seek to value the process of creation as one of the most highly regarded parts of the experience rather than the end result as a final “product.” In addition to his multitude of work, he has, with his partner Peter Cramer, also created Allied Productions Inc., a nonprofit arts umbrella, served as director of ABC No Rio alternative art collective from 1983-1990, and founded Le Petit

Versailles, a community garden in the Lower East Side.

Kyle Croft is a graduate of the University of Washington and former intern at Visual AIDS. He has also worked with MIX NYC and Seattle’s Reteaching Gender and Sexuality.
