

HYPERRALLERGIC

When Bieber Is Your Mirror

by Claire Voon
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Felix Bernstein, 'Bieber Bathos Elegy,' performed on January 15, 2016 at the Whitney Museum of American Art (all photos © Paula Court)

In a 2011 commercial for his fragrance “Someday,” Justin Bieber – then just 17-years-old – flies across sun-streaked heavens, a recently spritzed blond beauty in his arms. It’s hard to not feel some exhilaration (whether because of the heart-thumping music or the sheer cheesiness) from the video, which was just one of many clips projected successively on a screen as part of Bieber Bathos Elegy, a sold-out performance by Felix Bernstein and directed by Gabe Rubin that premiered this month at the Whitney Museum. That feeling of thrill, which characterizes Bieber at the start of his career as a newly discovered child pop star, was tinged with public trepidation as he matured into the inked young adult who accumulated a record of tomfoolery and criminality, eventually moving towards the solemnity found in his music today. Bernstein traces that path of emotion in Bieber Bathos Elegy, delivering it with a generous serving of absurdity but also a sincerity in reading the world of celebrity and identity.



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As its name suggests, the three-act play/musical/opera/experimental theater – the entire show defies classic categorization – explores the modern phenomenon of Justin Bieber and stardom bred in the digital age through concepts established by the ancient Greeks: Alexander Pope's concept of bathos, wrapped up in a poetic lament. In his artist's note, Bernstein defines bathos as:

[T]he failure to achieve pathos – the failure to achieve catharsis and the ubiquitous sympathy associated with drama – bathos: to land in the ridiculous, to be ridiculed, or to ridicule oneself – to blame oneself, instead of finding relief or sympathy or blaming another or fate. Pathos is a kind of mutual pity: bathos is self-pity, since no audience member cares.

Bernstein plays with the psychological throughout, pulling the audience into an often bewildering but amusing rollercoaster of a mindset. At the start, he merges childhood trauma and levity as he alludes to Bieber's ridiculous past. Donning a mask designed by Soren Roi that resembles sewn-together skin flaps, Bernstein appears as a frenzied adolescent seated in front of his laptop in the first act (dubbed "The Pervert's Lair of Memories"), obsessively pulling up an array of YouTube videos and old clips – all viewable to the audience on a larger screen – at times speaking directly to us. Old Christmas sing-a-longs, a snippet of the theme song from "Blues Clues," a girl on a China's Got Talent-esque show singing "Memory" from "Cats" – these musical videos are among the amusing digital detritus Bernstein shows alongside gems like the "Someday" advertisement, a segment of teen Bieber playing "Would You Rather" on "The Talk," and a three-year-old crying because she loves Justin Bieber and "knows he loves me back." Bieber's digital past is our comedy – evidenced by the laughter-filled theater – and thus his tragedy, and although it built his obsessed fanbase, it's one from which he must distance himself to mature.



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This performance through video reminds of Bernstein's own creative background: for years, Bernstein has chosen YouTube as his preferred medium of representation, posting videos of himself seamlessly adopting an array of identities. As much as it concerns the Canadian crooner's self-image, *Bieber Bathos Elegy* is also a diaristic work that reflects particularly on growing up in a media-saturated era. Like John Jesurun's performances that inundate us with all varieties of digital content, Bernstein's debut integrates references to home videos, Broadway hits, top 40 charts, and more. This sea of information collapses time and creates confusion, presenting a consumed self who's searching for anchorage – as emphasized by Bernstein's slipping into a number of characters as he does in his videos. In this sense, *Bieber Bathos Elegy* is also reminiscent of the chaotic and high-paced videos of Ryan Trecartin that explore indeterminate identities. And like Trecartin's work, Bernstein unfolds bizarre scenes whose meanings aren't always clear but remain riveting from their hyperactive spirit. Through this muddle presented in the frame of the celebrity, he examines his own personal purposes and perplexities, too.

A sudden emotional shift away, not unlike a jump cut, from the levity Bernstein sets at the start occurs in Act Two, when Bieber, played by immaculately coiffed and buffed Luke Smithers, makes his appearance as an expressionless angel, a figure of exemplary conduct but wholly colorless. Scaling an A-frame ladder as a choir kneels before him in reverence of an idol, he is far from the carefree Bieber with a case of perma-smile Bernstein showed in his video selection. He resembles the Bieber of today, kept in line by his awareness of constant scrutiny, knowing every move triggers YouTube view counts, Twitter retweets, Facebook shares that shape personal brand. Infamous for his slew of antics, as he attempts to demonstrate maturation, he is as critics have described the 21-year-old, now "joyless" and highly aware of his need to at least express remorse. As the *New Yorker's* Carrie Battan wrote, "He has either retreated so deeply into a state of contrition that he has lost his taste for fun or, more likely, become so fatigued by the process that he can't muster the energy required to have any." Bernstein alludes to such media profiles with simple switches in mood augmented by musical lamentations.



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The banger "Where Are Ü Now," off *Purpose*, is one of Bieber's most emotional, and it's the plea Bernstein chooses to herald the angel-pop star's arrival, sung by a choir of youths (millennials, if we must). Led by the dynamic Shelley Hirsch, the WHATEVER 21-clad group also sings a phenomenal rendition of "Tomorrow" from *Annie* in the ingenious style of a vocal warm-up that deconstructs the ditty into repetitive articulations. Although *Bieber Bathos Elegy* doesn't feature many major characters, with Bernstein contributing the majority of its dialogue, the choir's gripping performance shines as the most memorable. Repetition tends to breed reassurance; the tune becomes a mantra of encouragement that ups the drama of *Bieber Bathos Elegy* as we, too, start to root for Bieber's successful untethering from his IRL transgressions we witnessed through URLs. "Tomorrow," along with "Memory," recurs throughout the performance in various musical styles, weaving this hope for a better future – "The sun'll come out tomorrow!" the chorus chants – with notions of nostalgia – "I was beautiful then," Bernstein croons in one scene. He stands there as an image of lost glamor, dressed as a crone in a fur coat and glittering jewels, his vocals accompanied by Rubin's innovative, sinister arrangement of colliding notes performed by a three-piece band. In these moments that conflate time, musical genre, and ideals of identity, *Bieber Bathos Elegy* surges in emotion in its examination of success and contemporary stardom.



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But the performance already reveals its ending in its title – that this saturation of emotion, whether remorse or self-pity, will not lead to a true purging of character. By the end, Bernstein, still entranced with Bieber, faces his idol who floats as a projection against a cosmic sky. The result is ridiculous, made more so as digital Bieber ridicules Bernstein in a teasing spiel (again, reminiscent of quick-cut interchanges in Trecartin's work) that he spits out in a monotonous, somewhat glitchy voice: "Transgression is meaningless"; "suck my dick, faggot"; "I'm not yours"; "believe it, bitch, slut" or "and I'm like..." While as an angel he has literally risen above his wrongdoing, his words reek of artificiality and adolescence. Bernstein uses the framework of poetry to deliver loathing, an ugliness of art that demonstrates Bieber's failure to reach sublimity. All too self-aware, he is but a whiney dude with a nice bod.



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We, too, experience a moment of self-awareness early in the performance. After "Someday" streams, Bernstein yells to his audience, "I'll give you more! This is what you want, right?" His exclamation acknowledges that whether we idolize or loathe him, we expended our time to watch a performance that could be about only Bieber. We trekked to the Whitney because there's some kind of delight in a Bieber-filled experience: we went for spectacle. The dramatic singing and exaggerated performance Bieber Bathos Elegy delivers is satisfying – although at times it is a little too over-the-top, making for easy comedy. In such moments, it feels like Bernstein is over-amplifying his antics for a setting where he is all too aware of having to perform – in comparison to the space of video-making, where although he is performing, his "audience" is mediated through a nonjudgmental camera. But in playing with the audience's want for pleasure, Bernstein contemplates the purpose of artistic expression in relation to the pressures of an expectant public with a persistent gaze.