Leiomy Maldonado on the culture of vogue

September 28, 2016 - Known as the Wonder Woman of Vogue, dancer and trans icon Leiomy Maldonado has served as the art form's unofficial ambassador for well over a decade. Distinguished by her gravity defying acrobatics and a culturally ubiquitous hair whip, Maldonado has redefined voguing for a generation of dancers.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 4416 words.

Tags: Dance, Culture, Adversity, Beginnings, Inspiration, Identity.

You're considered a legend in the vogue world and are one of the most-watched dancers on YouTube. Can you imagine how your life might have been different had you not discovered the vogue balls when you were young?

Honestly, I don't know. I've often sat down and looked at all the blessings I have now, and when I look back and try to imagine what my life would have been like without dancing, without the balls… I don't know what my life would've been. I don't know if I would've been happy living or working in an office or just having a regular job. I feel like I was made for this.

Were you always a dancer, even as a child?

No. That's the crazy thing. I was into animals. I'm still into animals now, but when I was younger, it was about wanting to be a vet when I grew up. I wanted to be with animals and work with animals. When I was younger I liked to sing, and things like that, but it wasn't until I was 15 that I found out about voguing and fell in love with the energy and with the art form. I didn't do any research about the history of vogue or what it was—I just saw the style and mimicked it.

When I look back and try to imagine what my life would have been like without dancing, without the balls… I don't know what my life would've been.

I would show up at the balls to compete and they would tell me "You're no good." They always chopped me. The judges would be like, "No, that's not voguing. I don't know what you are doing." So from there, I started doing research and started looking into what is vogue and where it comes from. Learning the history and about the culture. That's what made me more amazed with the style itself. I basically used voguing as a stress reliever when I was younger, before even knowing what being trans was. I knew that I always felt like the opposite gender and I didn't know how to express that, but with voguing anything I felt I could let out on the floor. It was freedom.

The culture of voguing, and its history with the balls, sets it apart from other recognized forms of dance. All dances are generally rooted in some sort of cultural history, but few are linked with sexual and cultural identity in the way that voguing is. For many people in that world, the dance itself is a part of their personal identity. It's a part of their personal liberation.

Yes! I feel like the ball scene—which is where voguing was born—was started as a safe haven for the LGBT community to come and be a part of something spectacular and be who they wanted to be. Particularly in the early days, when you couldn't be "out" on the street on an everyday basis. The balls—where people would come to vogue and compete and show off—were a safe space and an outlet for fantasy.

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I feel like the ball scene was a blessing to the community because it gave us a place that we could call home and feel safe. Even now, it gives us a place of safety, even though the world is now more open to the LGBT community. We have a long way to go, but the ball scene is still there and I feel like the leaders that have been in the ball scene for a long time—that have gone through the ups and downs—are able to guide the other generations coming after us.

You've been a part of that culture for over a decade. How do you feel like the culture of voguing has changed over that time?

Yeah, a little over a decade… since 2003. The main thing that's changed is the amount of people that come to the events, because now it's very open. It's international. It's open to the public and it's more than just LGBT people that are able to enjoy it. As for the talent itself—the dancers—of course the talent exists now at a higher level. It's not what it used to be before. Twenty years ago voguing was more about poses and selling your garment and things like that. Now, it's more emotional. It's more liberating. You're not really in a box anymore. You get to do whatever you want, as long as you portray the five elements of what voguing is—the classic vogue movements.

Another thing that's changed is the acceptance of the ballroom scene overall. I feel like, especially overseas, voguing itself is a respected dance form. That wasn't always the case. People would say that voguing is not real dancing, but when I go overseas and judge these huge dance camp events and these huge competitions, they have hip-hop, they have breakdancing, they have all styles. Voguing is one of the styles. I feel like that's something that changed.

When you competed on MTV's America's Best Dance Crew in 2009, not only were you presenting this new iteration of voguing on an international platform, you were also one of the first trans people to be seen on that kind of show. Were you surprised by the reaction?

Surprised is not even the word. I was nervous. I've always had confidence, especially competing and being on stage, but those were little stages compared to America's Best Dance Crew. When I first went on the show, I didn't know how the world was going to receive me, so after going out there the first time and they introduced our crew, to see the amount of love that we received, it was immense. It touched my heart in the sense that it made me feel like I was respected for my talent and not only because I'm a trans woman.

Had the world not known where voguing actually came from, it might not be as popular as it is now.

I feel like for a lot of trans people anytime you do anything people describe it like, "Oh this is a transgender person who does this and that." Your gender is always talked about first. For me, I felt like they didn't care about that on the show. They saw the talent and they fell in love with that. That made me realize that it was something bigger than me. That I was there for a bigger purpose than just me winning a prize or dancing.

I remember watching that season and being blown away by it. It's wild to think about how much just the way we talk and think about trans issues has changed in the time since that show aired.

Yes, but the violence against trans people has actually become worse.

Because of increased visibility?

I think so. It's heartbreaking to hear these stories about these women whose lives are being taken away and no one is doing much about it. It gets talked about on social media, but no one is really doing anything about it.

What has been your experience of dealing with dancers who come from different practices? Say, how do hip-hop dancers or classically trained dancers react to the kind of dancing that you do?

Surprisingly, they've been open to it. Personally, I have been one of the people who has gotten nothing but good feedback when it comes to other dancers. I've never been trained, I never took any dance classes, nothing at all. When I meet people that are trained dancers and people who are professional dancers, and they give me all this credit and they tell me how amazing my dancing is, it's like, "wow," because to me, growing up and voguing, it was not seen as a real form of dance. The respect that I've received makes me feel like I belong, like I'm a part of this same world as other kinds of dancers.

I did a dance seminar at MoMA, and they chose 20 different styles of dance to be represented. I was the only voguer, which felt amazing. I was able to choose different spots throughout the museum to dance. I'd take 10 minutes to explain what voguing is, and then I'd show them. It was important because it opened up some people's eyes who probably never knew about voguing. They never thought of it as an actual dance style. People got to learn more about the culture itself.

There are a hundreds of YouTube videos of Leiomy Maldonado voguing and battling at balls. Friends and fans often assemble compilations like this one, appropriately titled "Leiomy being the baddest bitch."
The grand dame of Vogue culture, Jennie Livingston's legendary 1991 documentary, Paris is Burning, introduced the world to the history and culture of NYC's fabled vogue scene and forever changed the lexicon of gay culture. This is the origin of realness.
The culture of Voguing has undergone a radical evolution over the past three decades, but few documents are as beautiful—or as poignant—as Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York, 1989-92. Chantal Regnault's book of photos lovingly detail the origins of a culture that has largely existed outside the margins.
By appearing on MTV's America's Best Dance Crew in 2009, Leiomy Maldonado (along with her crew, Vogue Evolution) not only managed to bring a new iteration of Voguing to the masses, she also blazed a trail as one of the first trans women to appear on the network. Thankfully, someone has lovingly assembled Vogue Evolution's best performances into a single clip.
A Brief History of Voguing in New York City
Voguing: The Message

As someone who also teaches classes in how to vogue, how important is it that people understand where voguing comes from?

It's crucially important. That's the main reason why we went on America's Best Dance Crew. We got tired of seeing people copy the style and no one giving our community credit or saying where it came from. We felt like maybe we should do that. We never knew if we were going to get on the show or how far we were going to make it. We were not on the show to win. We just wanted to make sure people knew what voguing really looked like and where it comes from.

That's true for everything though. People should give credit where credit is due. I feel like a lot of times in the industry stuff gets stolen, and people don't get credit they deserve. A lot of people are used to that so they feel like, "Oh, no. It's okay. It happens." Even though it happens, it should not be okay.

I'm the type of person that will fight for it. I voice my opinion and let it be known because it is very important. Had the world not known where voguing actually came from, it might not be as popular as it is now. I feel like there was a moment years ago when people talked about it, but then it kind of disappeared. People would post videos sometimes—mostly videos showing people doing a drop—which we call a dip—and you'd see comments like, "Oh, this isn't dancing. They are just throwing themselves on the floor." Being on America's Best Dance Crew let us show people where it came from. People started to actually research it and find out about the balls. People assume that the balls are only about voguing. Then they find out about the culture around the balls, all the different categories, the houses… and then they're in awe even more.

When a mainstream artist contacts you to be in their video, how important is it to you that it feel like a collaboration? Or that they understand where your work actually comes from?

It depends. The first big video that I did was Willow Smith's "Whip My Hair." I was basically told, "Well, you're the queen of hair whipping and this is a video about whipping your hair. We want you to come and play the teacher and we'll just let you freestyle." When I get booked for things like this they usually want me to freestyle because they can see that's my thing. I've worked with a few other artists since then, like Rihanna, and it's not so much that I've taught them my style, but just that I've taught them how to be more confident or how to do certain things in heels or how to work the floor in certain ways. I can usually tell that when people approach me, they know what my talent is. They know what I'm good for. That's why they ask. I enjoy that.

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I don't want to be a part of something and feel like I can't show the people what I can do. That's a waste of time. If that's the case, I'd rather do projects on my own. I love it when they say things like, "We want to see you defy gravity. We want to see Wonder Woman on the floor." I appreciate that. It makes me feel like they appreciate my talent and not just my name. I don't want to be just another face.

When did the "Wonder Woman" thing start?

Wonder Woman probably started around 2008. I went to some ball and one of my friends was like, "Girl, you're like Wonder Woman." He's one of the MCs for the balls, Jack Mizrahi. He was like, "You're like a Wonder Woman. You can do it all!" I have to say, outside of just dance, anything I put my mind to I'm very good at. I taught myself how to sew about a month and a half ago. Anything manual, I'm very good at. So anyway, Jack says "Daughter, you're amazing. You're like Wonder Woman. That's your name, Wonder Woman," and he's like, "How can you say it in Spanish?" I tell him it is "La Mujer Maravilla."

Ever since then, when I'll be at an event, he'll call me out in Spanish. He would call out, "La Mujer Maravilla Leiomy!" People would say, "Well, that's an amazing introduction, but what is he saying?" I would explain, oh, that's Wonder Woman. Anyone who knows me, they're like, "Oh, that's the Wonder Woman of vogue because she can do anything. Whenever that music comes on, she just becomes a superhero and she just takes over the floor."

What do you see is the future of vogue and vogue culture? Where is it all going?

Honestly, I haven't seen it go much of anywhere as far as the mainstream dance world is concerned. I feel like we're still at the point where vogue is viewed as the lowest talent. Sometimes there will be auditions where they announce that they are looking for voguers. Then you go there and do your thing and realize that they don't even really know what voguing looks like. Or they'll book people who don't really know how to vogue or what it even is.

I'd love to see voguing be more accepted as a legit form of dance. I want to see it on Broadway. I want to see it done on huge stages, not just popping up in videos here and there. There's more than one way to vogue and I feel like you can pair voguing with almost anything.

For example, I did a play about three years ago with a group called CocoRosie. They put together this play and it was kind of like Rapunzel meets Cinderella and I was Rapunzel/Cinderella. I had this long braid and in one scene my fairy godparents come in and put this high leather boot on me and once they put the boot on the lights go out. Then I change into this very gothic look and I'm voguing, but I'm voguing to a live band, so it was very eerie and strange. The way I could let the art form speak for itself was really beautiful. The whole experience really opened my eyes and made me realize that I could take voguing somewhere else. It doesn't have to stay in the club and it doesn't always need the regular vogue music. I can do more with it.

Eventually I want to put together my own one-woman show that sort of explains how I started, where I am now, and where I eventually want to be—but doing by that showing all these different styles of vogue. I want to show people that it's not just a gay form of dance, but that it's a real art form.

I wondered if the reason that voguing hadn't become a bigger part of hip-hop dance and hip-hop culture was because it was still considered too gay.

That's true. I personally feel like if I would have been born female, I would be booked way more in America. I would be doing so many videos. I'd be in, like, Chris Brown videos and stuff like that. The fact that I'm transgender is an issue for them. It's like, "Oh I don't know. I might not want to make it seem like I hang out with trans people or that it's OK to hang out with trans people." Talent is talent. It shouldn't matter who the person is. If you want a certain kind of talent to be a part of your video, you book the best talent.

I feel like in America they're so ignorant about stuff like this. They worry about the association. They like you, but only from far away. You don't know how many celebrities that tag me on Twitter, or that I've met in person. They're like, "Oh, I've been following your work forever!" and I'm like "Oh, wow. That's it? You can just follow me but that's all?" It's crazy.

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A lot of women are getting involved in the ballroom scene now. I feel like little by little the women are going to be the ones voguing in videos and stuff. There are women who have been booked to vogue in things like Cirque du Soleil. Why can't I be in Cirque du Soleil, you know? Not that those women don't deserve it, but it makes me feel like I'm good enough to come and teach you this stuff, but you still can't bring me out on stage with you? It doesn't feel right.

What would you like to happen next? What do you want for the future?

I want to have my own studio. I want to have my own show. I want to also start my own vogue academy. I feel like that's important. I just recently opened up my house. It's called the House of Amazon. I feel like the most important thing about me and my house is that I teach them how to love each other, how to support each other, and that ballroom is an extracurricular activity. I mean, even for me it's an extracurricular activity. What I do as a job with voguing, that's different. That's my career. When it comes to the competitions and things like that, there will always be another one. Don't take it too seriously.

I teach my kids how to live life and to have a life outside of ballroom. A lot of times, the younger generation gets so sucked into the fame that ballroom can create that a lot of times they get lost. They stop working. They stop doing these things that are good for their life just because they want to be a part of the ballroom scene. I want to be that person that can guide my kids. When I first came out and started going to balls and dancing I was looked at as the black sheep and everyone always had something negative to say about me just because I wasn't a part of a crew and I wasn't kissing everybody's ass to be known. I feel like it's important for me to come back and do it in a way that I'm giving back to the community in that sense. A lot of people who get known in the ballroom scene eventually become successful and feel like they're too good for it. For me, I will never change how I feel about ballroom. Ballroom is my home. If it wasn't for ballroom, I wouldn't be able to do the things that I do or see the places that I see and travel to places that I travel to. It keeps me humble.

People outside of vogue culture might not understand this notion of "houses"—these adopted families that not only perform at the balls together, but literally provide familial support. That's the infrastructure that balls and vogue culture is really built on.

One of the things that has changed in this culture, unfortunately, is the "family" aspect of houses. Now it's really all about talent. People put together their houses and really look at new people as trophies, which I feel is fucked up. They have auditions and they look at their houses more like a dance company and less like a family. People want to be a part of certain houses because it can help them get them bookings. If you aren't good enough, they don't want you. I don't want that. I think everybody has potential. Everyone starts at a different level. For

me, it’s about the heart. If I bond with you on a personal level, you’re my child and if you want to be a part of the House of Amazon, you can be that. If you need help with anything, even if you don’t compete at balls, as long as you know you’re family, that’s all that matters to me, because that’s where ballroom started.

Ballroom is my home.

That’s why houses started. It was to create a family. Yeah, often full of talent, but family first is about being a family. It’s about guiding the children and loving each other and supporting and having unity. Ballroom has lost that.

For a lot of kids involved in the ball scene, their house was literally their only family.

I can say the same. My family has been supportive of me, but when I first transitioned they really didn’t know how to cope with it. Instead of me having to deal with that headache, I was like, let me just leave. When I find myself and I’m good in my own shoes and I’m the woman who I always felt like I was, then I can come back and then you can see that this is not a phase. When I left, that’s what I did. My family were the House of Mizrahi and some of the leaders there, they helped me mold myself into who I am today. Without that I would have been lost. I would have never known how my life could have been. I had people who kept me on the right path. People need that.

Do you have a lot of kids seeking you out?

Yeah. Every day. Especially after America’s Best Dance Crew aired. I was stopped in the street by parents. Like, “Oh my god, you’re the girl from America’s Best Dance Crew! After hearing about your story and really researching it, you helped me love and understand my child.” Things like that are what make me feel like I’m accomplished—the fact that what I’m doing is helping people in a positive way.

You’ve traveled all over the world, both as a performer and a teacher. Are you surprised by how far the culture of voguing has spread?

Yeah. I’ve been to Japan, all over Europe, Jamaica, and later this year I’m going to Brazil. I’ve been to Russia about three times and it’s like, “wow.” They have a huge culture for voguing and they actually do it right. They have balls. They have commentators. They have judges. They have people who come fully dressed to compete. You know what else is crazy is that overseas, they have a kids tournament with voguing. Here in America we’re still kind of ignorant about that. People would say voguing is kind of sexual and kids should not be dancing like that. In Russia there will be kids voguing and they go all out. So much amazing talent and no one is telling them they are too young to get into it.

When I come back to America after seeing the kids vogue in Europe, I’m like “Oh, y’all hoes is sleeping.”

Overseas, they’re still going full-out. Full-on effects, full-on outfits, so many different categories. If the category is calling for something specific, they’re going to bring it to life. That’s what’s lacking here in the states right now. People are so comfortable that they don’t go full-out. They don’t dress up. They don’t bring props. They don’t do anything. It’s just like, okay, play some music and they come out just wearing their regular clothes. When I come back to America after seeing the kids vogue in Europe, I’m like “Oh, y’all hoes is sleeping.”

Russia is such an oppressive place as well, which makes the fact that they are going all out—actually risking getting arrested—to do this all the more amazing.

Yeah. A lot of people take stuff like that for granted here in the States. People have to deal with a lot by throwing these events in places like Russia. You never know what they’re going to go through. We went through that here already. We went through those phases where we couldn’t be comfortable, where we were getting attacked

and stuff was getting shut down. We have to be grateful and supportive that there are people around the world participating in and celebrating our culture. That’s a blessing.

Name

Leiomy Maldonado

Vocation

Dancer, Muse, Teacher

Fact

Known as the Wonder Woman of Vogue, dancer and trans icon Leiomy Maldonado has served as the art form’s unofficial ambassador for well over a decade. Distinguished by her gravity defying acrobatics and a culturally ubiquitous hair whip, Maldonado has redefined voguing for a generation of dancers.

Photo: Ebru Yildiz