



ADVERTISEMENT

LANTERN THEATER COMPANY

Charles Dickens's  
**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**  
ADAPTED AND PERFORMED BY ANTHONY LAWTON

NOW STREAMING!  
**GET TICKETS**



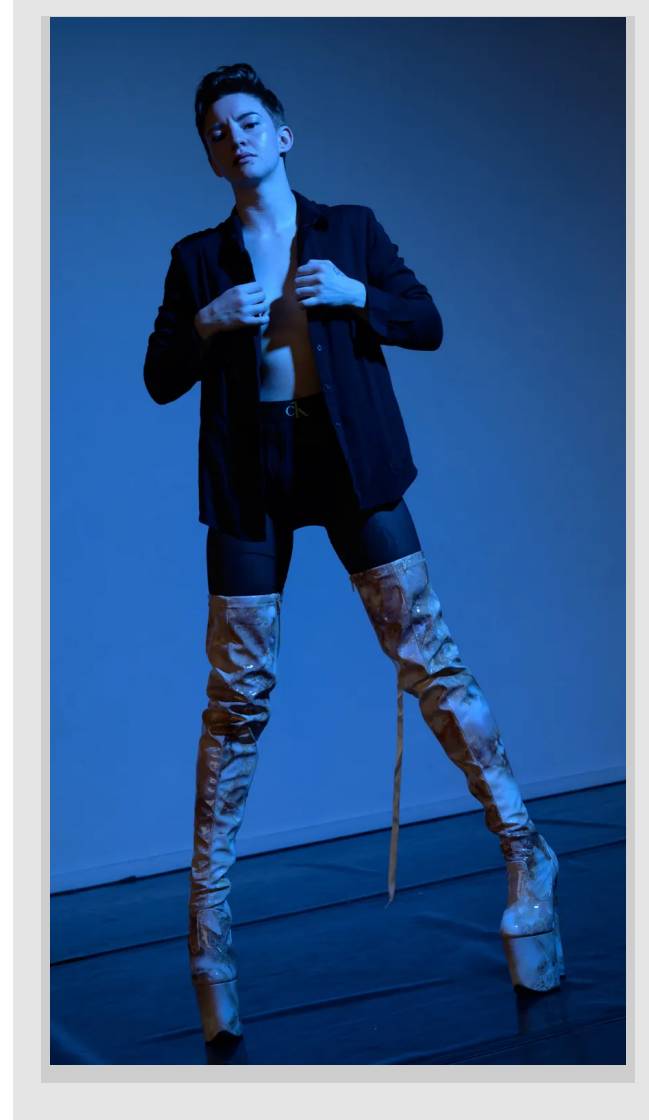
CIRCUS ARTS LOOKING INWARD AND  
OUTWARD

# Philly Fringe 2023: Toni Cannon's *ReFlection* and Mae West's *\$7 Girl*



Melissa Strong | Dec 28, 2023 |

In Dance and Theater | 4 minute read



Since establishing as an independent production hub of the Philadelphia Fringe in 2021, the Cannonball Festival has offered some of the city's most creative and edgy performances. This year, two autobiographical works of circus theater addressed aspects of transmasculinity. Toni Cannon's *ReFlection* uses circus arts, dance, and theater to tell a powerful and joyful story of self-acceptance. Mae West's *\$7 Girl* incorporates aerial work, improvisation, and

audience participation into a provocative exploration of sex, power, and justice.

## Reflections of a circus mirror

West is a founding producer of Cannonball and currently serves as marketing and media director. Cannon's *ReFlection* is the winner of the festival's inaugural [CSAW Award for New Work by Circus Artists of Color](#). ([CSAW](#), or Connecting Circus Students Around the World, was founded in 2018 to improve access to information and funding for circus arts students.) Their respective performances make clear that West and Cannon have unique voices and visions that audiences ought to experience.

*\$7 Girl* is a work-in-progress previously performed in 2021, and its title comes from an experience of sexual assault. West explained that he is not a girl but a transmasculine person who earns money through sex work. The show proposes "radical permissionism," wherein individuals embrace pleasure for themselves and others, celebrate when their pleasures align, and accept when they do not. This seemingly simple concept has the potential to transform personal and collective experiences of and attitudes about sex and pleasure. Moreover, it challenges norms surrounding consent, sex work, and rape culture. The first step of radical permission tends to be the hardest, as West observed.

Fittingly, *\$7 Girl* tests boundaries of ideas and performance in equal numbers. The performance began with West atop an aerial pole, smiling and making eye contact with viewers as he swung over them. West executed inversions, twirls, and crisp attitude spins throughout the show. But the heart and soul of *\$7 Girl* is the way West engages the audience in questioning pervasive views that likely impact people more than they realize. With energy and humor, West's clever metaphors transformed mundane actions, like ordering pizza, into simulated sex acts. In doing

so, he modeled ways to create sexual dynamics that prioritize the consent and well-being of all involved.

West's performance holds up a mirror to culture, while *ReFlection* turns the mirror inward on its subject. The show begins with an excellent short dance film that poignantly depicts experiences of gender dysphoria and transition. When a Black woman in a pink dress checked her reflection after applying makeup, Cannon appeared behind her and touched her. The video cuts to the two performers dancing together inside a striped shirt, embodying the masculine and feminine elements of a single identity fighting for control. When it ended, the victor took the stage, using gesture and mime to portray joy in his masculinity. Dissatisfaction and doubt crept in immediately, though, and Cannon's character embarked on a seemingly unending quest to become "man enough." He tried using such trappings as clothing, posture, and a bulge over his crotch before folding a skillet in half with his bare hands like a strong man in a circus.



*Toni Cannon's 'ReFlection' was another autobiographical circus performance at Cannonball. (Photo by Alexa Trevino.)*

Even with the crowd cheering on his feats of strength, it was never enough. Cannon's acting matched his physical strength in vulnerable moments of self-doubt. Without dialogue, he conveyed his character's fear of his reflection escalating into panic and leading to a cycle of substance abuse and depression. In the end, *ReFlection*'s protagonist finds self-love and acceptance through circus arts. Climbing, balancing upon, and sliding headfirst down a Chinese pole give rise to empowerment and a sense of self able to withstand the pressures of normative masculinity. Cannon reapproached the mirror in the final scene, hugging and kissing the reflection that he once avoided.

Both *ReFlection* and *\$7 Girl* incorporate various styles and modes of performance into thought-provoking and memorable shows. Cannon combined mediums into a tight, poignant individual journey to transmasculine self-love. Part TED talk and part sexy circus show, *\$7 Girl* is more ambitious yet less cohesive. West's voice and message are unique and refreshing nonetheless, and this show is unlike any other. Together, these performances left me eager to see more of Cannon and West, as well as circus arts at the intersection of storytelling and activism.

*At top: Mae West debuted \$7 Girl at this year's Cannonball Festival. (Photo by Johanna Austin.)*

## WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

---

*ReFlection*. By Toni Cannon. \$25. September 14-17, 2023, at Icebox Project Space, 1400 N American Street, Philadelphia. (215) 413-1318 or [phillyfringe.org](http://phillyfringe.org).