

BROOKLYN RAIL

Critics Page

Stalk

By **Ericka Beckman**



Ericka Beckman, *STALK* (2021). Performa Commission for the Performa 2021 Biennial. Image courtesy of the artist.

Somewhere around 1989, the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* really stuck with me. The reason being that the fairytale ending was very unfulfilled. What happens to Jack after he gets to the top of the beanstalk? What interested me is that there's this difference between what's happening on the ground and what's happening above the ground, and that these two worlds coexist and are connected by this umbilical cord called the beanstalk.

This symbol goes way back into early ritual and early ideas of the genesis of the world.

I was also fascinated by the character of Jack. This term "Jack," which is a name, is also a common noun. If you trace the etymology of the word "jack," you'll find out that jack is a worker. At the very beginning, the "jack" was a slave or a helper like "boot jack," "lumber jack," "stable jack," a "jack of all trades," and then it moves from this body and becomes a tool: "jack hammer," "jack saw," "steeplejack," "jack knife." Then it becomes even smaller, a miniaturized "phono jack"—a tiny, integrated element of a circuit. I thought, okay, so "Jack" is this idea of a workforce that is constantly with us. He's a tool and he's a worker.

Philip Martin Gallery

In my rendition a lot happens on the beanstalk that is transformative. The beanstalk itself represents a couple of things. First the beanstalk is a female figure, because the female figure is part of the growth process of the Stalk and is also kind of the DNA of the Stalk.

The Stalk is a growing entity that connects the workforce to the Cloud. It also represents the stock market. The Stalk is affected by the trade winds. I am developing an analogy here between the natural world of growth and the sign system of the stock market.

Jack represents a workforce of farmers. He is first transfixed by the growth power of the 'stock' and becomes a traitor to his farm community. The trade winds blow in all directions with all sorts of force. In the end the farmers, through some serendipity, harness the wind for their own use and are able to preserve their land from a takeover by the giant conglomerate in the Cloud.

My Beanstalk Lady is an aerial rope artist. She teaches him about the "highs" and "lows" of the Stalk. The Stalk journey is a never ending up and down sine wave. At the top it is important to have awareness, but nothing really good emerges from the top. In my rendition, a cloud replaces the fairytale castle; a cloud where all the stock data is manipulated and stored.

It's at the bottom of the curve that real growth happens. It's the way you manage the lows that defines who you are.

The beanstalk is created by puppeteers who wear these leaves on their hands. I wanted it to be completely random and natural so I chose to perform rather than animate it. The farmers are simply silhouetted characters that are performing functional work movements. They are also represented by the chorus. Even though they're not lip-synching, the voices of the chorus will be the farmers speaking. My Jack is a solo singer accompanied by a live drummer on stage.

There are two components: one on a screen and one live. The elements that are on the screen are animated and symbolic, and the performers are integrated with them. Often the performer—both Jack and his double—and the farmers and their doubles are on the video screens, and then also on the stage.

There is a flatness and a depth that happens. There's an illusion to a landscape, there's an illusion to these locations, like the stock exchange. There's a real world and there's a simulated world, but the simulated world is more or less on the stage and the real world is on the screen, so it's kind of reversed. What is important for me in my Performa piece is to have very distinct symbolic scenes that are not necessarily connected by linear theatrical continuity. I develop a theme and then jump to another one, much like montage editing in film.

My rendition of *Jack and the Beanstalk* is a way for me to visualize pertinent questions we are facing today: How to make important transformations in our culture? Who can make those transformations, or who has the agency to make them? This piece is also a means to give value to alternative energy.