Jess Dobkin’s *Everything I’ve Got* is a poignant meditation on the possibilities for life and art-making in the face of an uncertain future. Moved by the untimely death of a filmmaker friend, Dobkin was prompted to write a piece that would enumerate all the ideas that remain kicking around in her head, just in case this performance (or “performance blueprint,” as she calls it) might be her last. In the full-length work from which this excerpt is taken, Dobkin’s lecture-demonstration moves her through various costumes and actions, all layered onto her own plangent artist-persona as she contemplates the too-quick passage of time.

Dobkin begins by decorating herself from head to toe as a mirrored ball, turning herself into the disco emblem that brilliantly refracts light. From there, she strips down literally to fuck herself with a condom-wrapped dildo, transferring the public, presumably collective pleasure of disco into a public but more intimate act of self-pleasure. Then she enacts a birthing ritual by poising the head of a mannequin named Patricia on the dildo that juts out from her crotch as she stands upside-down. After each action, Dobkin piles her props on the discarded mirror-ball suit, collecting items and images into a shrine to both possibility and endings.

Using a Visual Presenter device (a kind of overhead projector) to broadcast objects, headlines, and images to an audience she addresses directly, Dobkin runs through all her performance ideas. She imagines a press conference in which she announces a breakup with a girlfriend; audio interviews with sperm donors that address people’s questions about her daughter’s conception; portraits of family and strangers posed as though they’re related; a coffee table book of photographs of therapists’ offices; a list of objects—including clowns—she can publicly put into her vagina; photographs of people’s faces...
as they’re taking a shit; posters of “lost lesbians” (lost from relationships and others’ lives, not lost from their own); karaoke cars on subways; and many more. This inventive, dizzying recitation and partial performance of imaginative ideas builds momentum toward a contemplation of her own death and how she might be buried or memorialized. The excerpt presented here ends the performance with Dobkin crouched underneath her stage-within-a-stage—her “presentation table”—telling the unicorn story as a puppet show projected onto the shrine and its previously arranged objects.

With the unicorn story, Dobkin reinterprets the biblical flood that prompts God to admonish Noah to build an ark, the two-by-two fairy tale in which species are saved and their future procreation insured by their coupledom. In Dobkin’s retelling, the singular unicorn represents a queer resistance to such reproductive and other binaries. Missing the injunction to board the ark for salvation, the unicorn fails to obey or comply. The unicorn frolics (by which Dobkin says she means “fucks”) in the rain, happily playing in the face of apocalypse. She continues to romp about the shore not, Dobkin clarifies, from any superior sense of destiny or worth; she isn’t saving anyone else or purposefully neglecting the call to safety and a dubious future. She just remains.

Dobkin reports that the coupled animals watch the unicorn from the deck with “disdain” and perhaps muted envy, “remembering what it feels like to run free on the mountain.” But because they’ve made the safe choice, they blame the unicorn for her blithe recalcitrance, deciding that maybe “she caused the rain to fall. Maybe she is too much. Too much thinking, too much fucking, too much dreaming, about things big and small.” In other words, the unicorn symbolizes too much refusal to conform to gendered and sexual norms that insist on circumspection, denial, moderation, acceptance without analysis, and physical abnegation, all to perpetuate a world that may or may not regenerate into a real community. Because even as they embark, the obediently paired animals soon realize they’ve made common cause with “so many that they cannot call friends.”

Dobkin’s challenge to binaries peppers her dolorous, evocative language. A great price is levied for the singular unicorn’s nonconformity; she “knows early that it is too late.” She seeks higher ground, but as the disastrous rain continues, she finds herself submerged, watching from below the unaffected sky above, “performing a hollow song” that she conducts with the baton of her horn. And as the unicorn disappears, Dobkin tells us that history is written, constructing a before and an after that forever marks the process of remembering from which memory is created: “BF. Before flood. BFF. Before forgetting the flood. BFFFF. Before forgetting to forget the flood.”
In this short excerpt from a haunting, one-hour performance, Dobkin invests the unicorn with queer subjectivity, a lesbian “she” whose disappearance marks the beginning of a memory that can barely be fathomed. As a stand-alone coda to a piece that predicts incalculable loss, the unicorn’s story richly metaphorizes the radical lesbian refusal of heteronormativity, her rejection of the insistent complacency of couples, and her resistance to the domesticity the social covenant requires to guarantee a future. Dobkin’s unicorn would rather disappear than board the boat as part of a procreative pair. But Dobkin doesn’t valorize the metaphoric figure as a heroine; the unicorn was just living her life otherwise, proceeding as usual, when the call to board the future sounded. Her fatal disappearance isn’t punishment so much as the natural state of her queer subjectivity. She’s not yet freed herself from earth’s gravity like the dove, who circles overhead while the unicorn drowns. The dove bears the weight of symbolism not of her own making, Dobkin remarks ruefully, a burden she won’t set on the unicorn’s shoulders.

But in her disappearance into history and folklore, the unicorn becomes the dividing line between then and now, a “perhaps-er,” like the gender-crossed Albert Nobbs in Glenn Close’s film of Simone Benmussa’s play, neither here nor there but suspended in a state of desire whose only tragedy is that it can’t, finally, be fulfilled. Dobkin, though, resists ending Everything I’ve Got on a tragic note, opting instead for a matter-of-fact description of the new absence of one who was so vitally present. The unicorn disappears: “All of the work of creation, all of its details, gone. The body is gone. The voice is gone. Even the scars are gone.” Her loss draws the slash in binaries Dobkin has already rejected (or embraced with a difference). The unicorn lives on in the “and”: “warm and cold, salty and fresh, rapid and still.” The unicorn is inscribed in the in-between. She becomes memory, engraved in the interstices of opposed terms. She becomes hope in dismay, presence in absence, and vice versa. The unicorn remains in the regrets, which Dobkin calls “a testament to our destruction . . . A title. An idea. An essence”—a lingering, wistful reminder that calls for another story, another body, to carry memory.

Seeing the unicorn’s story projected as a puppet show across an accumulation of objects redolent of Dobkin’s past and potential (or potentially foreclosed) future enhances its aching poignancy. Watching the objects as the story is told, with Dobkin crouched under the presentation table, bespeaks already the absence of a body, the already gone unicorn. And with the figure of the lesbian/queer performer actively withdrawing from the stage, appearing to take shelter from its demands for presence, the unicorn’s great refusal and the counterintuitive great hope in her absence are palpable indeed.
Heather Woodbury as a frog in the production of her 12-part solo saga, As the Globe Warms. Photo by Caroline Spitzer