

Davis, Andrew. "Queer choreographer Brendan Fernandes reflects on the arts, upcoming performances and flux," *Windy City Times*, 8 September 2026.



DANCE Queer choreographer Brendan Fernandes reflects on the arts, upcoming performances and flux



by **Andrew Davis**

September 8, 2026



Brendan Fernandes: *In the Round*, Driehaus Museum, 2026. Photo by Robert Chase Heishman

Brendan Fernandes (he/they) is one busy individual.

The Chicago-based contemporary artist—a Canadian with Kenyan and Indian roots who examines everything from migration to queer issues through interdisciplinary performance—will host [*Brendan Fernandes: Score for the Murphy Auditorium*](#) at the Driehaus Museum on Sept. 16 (4-6 p.m.), Oct. 14 (5-7 p.m.) and Nov. 14 (3-5 p.m.); there will also be open rehearsals and other events (e.g., film screenings) around those dates.

In this critically acclaimed durational work, performers from across Chicago's independent dance community will gather to create a dynamic site for sculptural installation, movement and sound inspired by the pioneering spirit of New York City's Judson Dance Theater.

Then, on Sept. 17-Oct. 24 (with an opening reception at 7 p.m.), Fernandes will present the solo

exhibition *Brendan Fernandes: The Noise Will Sound* at the gallery moniquemeloche. *Noise* will present photos shot on film that feature figures shrouded in patterned Shuka cloth—a vibrant checkered fabric traditionally associated with the Maasai people of Kenya yet rooted in British colonial influence.

Windy City Times: You're quite the cosmopolitan individual. You were born in Kenya and grew up in Canada; you went to New York City as well and now you're based in Chicago.

Brendan Fernandes: I appreciate that title; that's very gracious of you. But, yes, I was born in Nairobi; my family is a fifth-generation Kenyan-Indian family. We emigrated to Canada when I was young—1989, to be exact—and then I grew up there. And then I moved to New York to study and stayed in New York from 2005 to 2016. Then I moved to Chicago and I've been here 10 years now.

WCT: So what has brought you to Chicago?

BF: So I came as a visiting artist to Northwestern University on a one-month contract; I was here for a month to respond to an exhibition at the Block Museum [that was by] the performance artist and musician Charlotte Moorman. Then I was getting involved with other things at the university and other departments.

Later, I applied for their official visiting artist position, got it and moved to Chicago. So I came for one month and I ended up being here for 10 years. Chicago is my home base and I'm tenured now at the university.

WCT: I imagine you became interested in the arts when you were very young—like you discovered this passion when you were practically out of the womb.

BF: [*Smiles*] I really was always interested in drawing, painting and making crafts, and I was a creative. When I moved to Canada was when I found dance, which was a really important part of my trajectory as well. It was a place for community—it was a way I felt seen and I could express myself.

After that, I was always involved in dance and visual arts. But in high school, I also wanted to make big paintings and sculptures. I was always very ambitious, but I loved it. But you know immigrant parents; they were, like, "You should be a doctor or a lawyer." And I said, "I'm going to be a dancer and an artist."

But my parents always supported me. I think there was probably some nervousness: "How will he achieve things and what's that going to be?" They left Kenya to build us a better life. But I was always inclined toward being in the arts. It brought me joy and connections to the community.

WCT: I also read that you have had a love-hate relationship with dance, in a sense, because you were injured. (I believe it was your hamstring.) But you fell back in love with dance. Tell me about that journey.

BF: You do your research. Dance is such a hard vocation because you're using your body. And like in a technique or art form like ballet, which is what I was studying, there are many things [in addition to the physical]. I was always told that you can't be Romeo because Romeo is not a brown man, and that I was not tall enough to be a male-identifying dancer. So there's like a racialized space as well.

So there were those kinds of moments, but I kept on pushing and preserving because dancing was a passion. And so when I got injured, I thought, "I did all this work and now my body's failing me." So I kind of went into this thing, like, "I don't want to talk about it anymore." And I would say it's my first breakup that we broke up with each other physically, mentally and emotionally.

But I can now say—and maybe it sounds strange—that I'm actually quite grateful for my injury because it gave me criticality; it gave me ways to regain, to rebuild, to become a different type of dancer. I don't dance on stage myself anymore, but I'm constantly rethinking what a dance or dancer can be. I'm challenging [norms] in my work through narratives [involving] race, gender and sexuality. So I feel like I've been given a different way of making and supporting dance in my work.

WCT: You mentioned the stage, but your works don't really take place on it. They take place elsewhere, including [outdoors]. I saw *The Rite* at the MCA last year [which took place on the museum floor as part of *City in a Garden: Queer Art and Activism in Chicago*]. That's what put you on my radar.

BF: Well, thank you. A big part of my work is about social gathering and community-building. I feel dance is political in the sense that when we move together, there's a sense of unification and solidarity that I really appreciate. But when I work with dancers and I choreograph them, it's never on a stage; it's always in a round. For me, that's a way of also challenging the way we see things.

There's not a proscenium stage where you stand or sit and you look. So I'm also thinking about many ways of seeing performances. Also, it's not like it's durational. There's no start to end; you can watch it for five minutes or an hour. There are different ways that you have agency to make choices in the work.

WCT: You've also said you like things to be in flux, which sounds like something a drama queen would say.

BF: What do you mean by that? [Smiles] You asked me about my identity; being Kenyan, Indian and Canadian while living in the United States is something that's in flux. I'm never static. I'm never one thing and I'm never a finite thing. I'm always changing.

It's dance, it's visual arts, it's architecture, it's design—it's always in flux, for lack of a better word. It's always a process. I have a cultural identity, but I'm also very influenced by music and punk rock and politics so my subculture is also a big part of my identity.

And for me, there is also a sense of the queer. Having a queer identity is a big [thing] for me, but I don't just believe my queer identity is about gender and my sexuality. Queer is this idea of being open, inclusive and always trying to understand yourself through a space that is changing and in flux.

WCT: Regarding *Score for the Murphy Auditorium*, how did this partnership with the Driehaus come about?

BF: I think I've always had a connection with Lisa Key, the director of the museum. She invited me to lunch and showed me the museum's auditorium. I just started to look at the space and had ideas. From there, we just started to question and talk about collaboration.

Score for the Murphy Auditorium is a dance piece that I've choreographed with a sculptural

mirrored furniture piece that was made in collaboration with AIM Architecture. When we do the activations, which are weekly per month, Wednesday night is always in the round. Then I give one of my dancers the space to kind of create their own work.

WCT: And with *Score*, you conjure the spirit of one particular school.

BF: I wouldn't say it's a school—maybe it's a school of thought. The Judson Dance Theater was a space in New York that influenced me but it involved dancers, choreographers and others taking over this church in downtown New York. It became a space where they started experimenting. So I wanted that idea.

WCT: I watched an interview with you on YouTube. One person commented, "How is it possible for me to perform in a museum if I'm not with an Ivy League university or I'm not popular or famous?" So, what would your advice be to that person?

BF: I didn't start at a university or I didn't start being famous. It's about drive, passion and working for it. There's no specific formula, but when you put yourself out there, there's risk. But when I'm told no, I'm gonna then push even harder, and that's just the person I am. And so, I would just say to keep at it.

WCT: I've been asking this question to different people. What does representation mean to you?

BF: Like I said, dance (for me) is political.

And as a POC queer-identifying person, representation is important because I want my community to have the equality and value that others share. So when we're marginalized, the representation means that I can then represent for others as well in my community. I want to be seen and heard, but I also want to get to a place where I don't need to be seen and heard because I'm on an equal playing field.

So representation means being valued and being given the same rights as a greater hegemony of whiteness, let's say. And I always tell my dancers that if you get a job, never do it for free because you have to build a value system and structure so we're not seen as free labor. We have to do the work more, and that's why we have to put ourselves up on pedestals to protect ourselves; we need to value ourselves and make ourselves be seen. Even the piece of *moniquemeloche* is about camouflage and hiding, but also showing the body through hypercolor and visibility as a form of protest.