

Strangers On a Train

D.C. 9th International Improvisation Plus+ Festival
December 13, "Redline Revisited," Union Station to Friendship Heights
December 13, Jack Guidone Theatre, Joy of Motion Dance Center
Washington, D.C.

By Lisa Traiger

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There are live spaces and dead spaces in which to perform. One of the deadest of spaces in Washington, D.C. is the Jack Guidone Theatre at Joy of Motion's Friendship Heights studio. I have nothing against Joy of Motion or the welcome option of an inexpensive, dancer-run venue, especially in a metropolitan region sorely lacking in appropriate mid-sized theaters for dancers. But let's face it, the space is nearly unworkable: long and narrow with low ceilings and inadequate risers, no wings and almost inaccessible sight lines for anyone less than 5'10" or so. I've never fully seen a performance without sitting on my knees or peering into the studio mirrors lining one side of the space for a better view.

The deadness of the space became most evident on Saturday evening when I joined up with plucky CatScratch Theatre on a one-way trek through Washington's Metro Red Line on my way to the final weekend of the D.C. 9th International Improvisation Plus+ Festival, which opened a week earlier at the Marvin Center Theater at George Washington University and concluded Sunday at the Jack Guidone Theatre.

CatScratch Theatre is a young collective of dancers and dance-theater types who come together periodically for interesting and out-of-the-ordinary projects. "Redline Revisited" rode D.C.'s mostly sterile brown, orange and yellow Metro cars from Union Station up to Friendship Heights, just on the Maryland border. From there the six dancers lead a diminishing group of travelers to Joy of Motion's Jack Guidone Theatre where the Improvisation Festival was winding down after two weekends of performances, classes and workshops that drew participants from across the nation and around the world.

While the headliner's were performing in the low-ceilinged boxed-in space at Joy of Motion—including Hungary's Estzer Gal, D.C.'s Dan Burkholder and Baltimore's Cathy Paine on Saturday—the real stars of the evening were the six dancers of gutsy CatScratch Theatre.

"Come ride the Red line with us ... we're CatScratch Theatre," whispered a woman after slithering across a cement bench in Union Station. She handed me a business-sized card and snuck up to the next unsuspecting customer. Sometimes riding along with the unexpected makes for a serendipitous hour or two, as it did on Saturday. The CatScratch dancers and a small cohort of assistants—a flag carrier and one or two who lugged bags of cold weather layers—began stealthily, hard to spot in their wool caps and winter coats. But soon slight, ponytailed Stephen Clapp instructed us to board the next Red Line train bound for Shady Grove. Along the way we disembarked at pre-planned stops at Gallery Place, Metro Center and Dupont Circle before finishing up with a game of follow the leader at Friendship Heights that took us to the door of the Jack Guidone Theater.

Site-specific work isn't new, not even in a conservative and now security-conscious city like Washington. But most of the site-specific performances have been in Washington's grander

more rarefied public spaces—the marble halls of Union Station, the red-carpeted runway-long lobbies and hidden backstage spaces of the Kennedy Center, the highbrow art filled rooms of the Hirshhorn Museum, the open-air steps of the National Gallery of Art facing the swath of green on Pierre L'Enfant's lovely Mall, and the awe-inspiring steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Drawing from ideas of both Brazilian director and activist Augusto Boal and New York director and professor Richard Schechner, which aim to bring artistic endeavors into the lives of individuals with the hope of instigating a personal social or political change, CatScratch Theatre has made its own brand of guerilla theater as non-confrontational and palatable as possible. While guerilla theater techniques usually swoops down on the unsuspecting who experience performers in out-of-the-ordinary acts, CatScratch's guerilla techniques are much tamer. They're not so much interested in evincing some grand political overthrow as they are in shaking up the staid sensibilities of a few unsuspecting patrons. They want to surprise riders out of their banal excursions and open them up to the possibilities of lively urban spaces.

Once we board the train, the dancers began to strip. Down to their red pants, T-shirts, skirts and tights, they're now easy to spot in the burgeoning crowd of riders. At Gallery Place, we disembark and the company leads us to a pleasant window-like view that frames the dancers in an overlook to the lower platform, two escalators riding up and down on either side, the immense, vaulted cement ceiling arching overhead. Standing in front of the elevators, in unison the dancers fling themselves en masse, forward, back, side, forward, side, and on. Passengers on the way to the MCI Center for a National Hockey League game variously ignore, comment and gawk at the performers. Soon they mount the escalators riding up and down, bodies bending, arching, stretching or contracting into the most-uncommon of anti-commuter shapes. Most affecting was the moment when they turned back toward us riding upward, eyes vacant in that disconnected lost-traveler stare that many assume in transit, whether on the way to work or around the world. It proved an uncomplicated and evocative moment.

Next one of the collective's leaders, Jessica Hirst, taught any willing travelers the jerky train sequence, where bodies bounce and fling forward, side or back in unison like a call-and-response party game. Groups and individuals from across the platform called out instructions which everyone gamely followed. Later, willing travelers were divided into three groups to play some theater games—shape body sculpting, role-playing and so forth. There, clearly the organizers wanted strangers to make contact, break down barriers and forge new, if momentary, relationships. But it's not clear how many people made contact with complete strangers.

Later riding the rails again, the performers stage conversations about the inanities of traveling by Metro noting the reluctance of many - the majority?— to make eye contact. They swing from the above-head gripper poles, pull themselves up and flip like kids on monkey bars. They sway with the train's movement and make all-out spectacles of themselves. For much of the journey no one minds terribly aside from one cranky station manager at the outset who mumbled something about obstructing the platform and another lawyerly gentleman who bemoaned the risks the performers were taking for themselves and others: "What if someone got hurt?" he queried. "Who would be responsible?"

At Friendship Heights the final destination for "Redline Revisited," the last movement structure took place on the platform where dancers released themselves into a murky underwater-like ballet with an emotive core. One or another dancer would fall, lie still like a police chalk line, as the others, sometimes in silent gaping mouthed screams lunged,

stretched, bent and swayed around them. A devastatingly serious moment in the lighthearted journey, it reminded the knowing of the many dangers that have befallen or urban centers in recent years and the loss of the innocent—whether in the World Trade Center and Pentagon, in D.C., Maryland and Virginia at the hands of snipers, in terrorist bombings in world capitals, or anthrax deaths through something as seemingly innocuous as mail. Our cities, CatScratch's performers seem to be telling us, are wonderful places where we can enjoy a vibrant and comfortable life, but we mustn't forget they are also places where danger may lurk, where people may get hurt, where hemorrhaging bodies and spirits should affect us all.

From there the six dancers lead a straggling group of travelers to Joy of Motion's Jack Guidone Theatre where the Improv festival was winding down after two weekends of performances, classes and workshops that drew participants from around the nation and across the world. While the headliner's were performing on the low-ceilinged boxed space at Joy of Motion—including Hungary's Estzer Gal, D.C.'s Dan Burkholder, and Baltimore's Cathy Paine—the real stars of the evening were the six dancers of plucky CatScratch Theatre. Paine and saxophonist John Berndt sketched out a quirky opening duet. Sharon Mansur, Marcy Schlissel and Ginger Wagg in "Middle Voice" played off of pairs and singles, middle and outside relationships, and "3(trio)" for Burkholder, Megan Flood and Gal featured a lengthy duet for Gal, who seems to favor a brusque attack rather than the liquidy silky style of many of D.C.'s improvisers including Burkholder. After intermission a 25-minute free-for-all set, the program notes that "anything might happen, everything is possible," allowed dancers to come and go from the stage space, but as is the nature of improv performance, little of import occurred. Improv, choreographer Trisha Brown tells us, is "practicing not knowing what you're about to do." In the confines of the theatrical setting, improvisation offers limited surprises. But when taken to the streets—or the Metro in this case—the unknown is everywhere. Look how they walk across the top of the bench like a gymnast on the balance beam. See how they cross the station in a perfectly time 12 minute improv and arrive back at the starting point just as the next outbound train pulls in. Look how they twitch, scratch, sniffle and fidget in an orchestrated symphony as riders stare and gawk not realizing that they're being mimicked to a T. Marvel at how they've found beauty in the plain-Jane Metro architecture of Harry Mohr Weese's 1970s system with its brown, orange and cement designs, dysfunctional brown pylons and cavernous vaulted ceilings. See how dancers can change perspectives when they're dancing with us, moving us and asking us to move. In such close proximity the destination is beside the point, the art is in taking the journey.

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