

Posted by David Cuthbert, Theater writer August 14, 2008 5:00AM, New Orleans, LA

The Energy and Teamwork of Ensemble Theater/Dance Dazzles

Nick Slie of the local Mondo Bizarro theater company summed up the crux of ensemble theater work Tuesday night at Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre: "The value of people collaborating over a period of time, investigating movement and the moment to seek a unique artistic voice."

Four national theater and dance companies demonstrated in performance what ensemble theater can deliver that traditional theater rarely does: the beauty and humor of intricate, precise work where individuals are so attuned to one another that a performance flows as naturally as water. Here, too, was breathtaking dance of varying disciplines and knock-about, raucous comedy. Apart from one duo that overstayed its welcome, it was a dazzling evening of offbeat entertainment, part of the Network of Ensemble Theater (NET) gathering in New Orleans.

The Olive Dance Theatre from Philadelphia, which specializes in Hip Hop and Breakin' was exuberantly represented by five accomplished, energetic dancers with an abundance of astonishing, gravity-defying moves: Jamal Benjamin, Tony Denaro, Kelly Snell, Joe Son and Cesa Zuniga. Excerpts from "Real Thing Come, Real Thing Go," used an urban cityscape's ambient sound to get into and out of explorations of shifting identity, with generational challenges, expressed in dynamic solos and unison work, never missing an opportunity for comic comment. Zuniga's revolving on one hand, his legs kicking up and out, was sensational and the rapidity of Tony Denaro's flashy footwork consistently impressive. Compulsively watchable, The Olive Dance Theatre was expressive and exhilarating.

DanceNow's "Haunted" found Laura Schandelmeier and Stephen Clapp telling the story of the alleged possession and exorcism of a young man in 1949 that inspired "The Exorcist": Clapp's dance dramatization of fighting against the demon, the herky-jerky movement of being possessed, even seeming to levitate. Schandelmeier's priest tried to hold and contain his movement, eventually resulting in a kind of hand-to-hand dance combat. Eloquent movement, exotic music and iridescent, transparent costuming combined to make this shorter piece strangely transporting.

I think that Lisa Fay and Jeff Glassman belong in some kind of genius category. Their "Depth of a Moment" surreal vaudeville -- an off-kilter restaurant encounter, a man whose every movement is accompanied by an apt sound, a couple whose inane conversation keeps burping into rewind and finally, a long episode performed by Fay entirely in reverse -- is endlessly creative. Dialogue is sparse apart from classic double-talk by Glassman in the first scene and snatches of words here and there. One is reminded of silent film comedians and European circus clowns, who hone their material to its essence.

It is surprising then, for a duo steeped in precision and carefully judged visual and aural effects, to misjudge how much of their quirky, prop-heavy material to perform on a bill that was supposed to offer a taste of each company. The final scene seemed to take forever to set up and perform. All in all, it reminded me of an Oriental dancer of my father's acquaintance: On Too Long.

The evening concluded on a high, raucous note: The New York Neo-Futurists performing the fabled "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind," which originated in Chicago and is subtitled "30 Plays in 60 Minutes," here adjusted to 15 plays in 30 minutes, thank goodness. Performewd by "Erica," "Rob," "Jacquelyn," "Cara" and "Joe," it found the audience yelling out the numbers from a "menu" of short plays. The one everyone wanted to see first was "Hot Lesbian Semi-Historical Love Vignettes Starring Barbie and Barbie." "Boys Gone Wild!" had an inspired spit-take conclusion. "I'm Drawn to You, Chicken" found Rob reciting an ode to a rubber chicken while Joe, sitting above the audience in the follow-spot operator's seat, tore into fried chicken with a frenzied vengeance. "Lonely Dog" was brilliant -- a master-less dog has to find a way to throw her own stick, while "Untitled Big Easy Play No. 1" poked fun at what makes us so, uh, special.