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Photo: Daniel Kontz

Leaping Forward and Larger: Insight into Almanac's Revisited Work for Fringe

by Whitney Weinstein

Four seafarers sit on their boat—which in the gallery space of *The Painted Bride* is, in actuality, a sofa—speaking of stimulating experiences. They debate: coffee or tea, hand flowering or sex, thoughts had on land or at sea. They vibrate concurrently, disappear down imaginary stairs, and balance teacups stacked four tall.

Co-founders Ben Grinberg and Nick Gillette, along with company members Adam Kerbel and Nicole Burgio, constructed *Leaps of Faith and Other Mistakes* [*LOF*] two years ago, after traveling to Montréal and dabbling in some training with Cirque du Soleil. The subsequent creation of Almanac Dance Circus Theater fell into place naturally. After I sat in on a recent rehearsal, Ben explained to me that “we made that one show together and then we were just a company.” In returning to *LOF*, Adam explained, co-creators reassessed their current positions in life. “What leaps of faith are we taking? When do you jump into something without knowing what the outcome will be?”

With aspirations to tour internationally, Almanac eagerly embraced a call in February to participate in the [International Circus Exposure](#) through Circus Now. The company chose an excerpt from *LOF*, received positive feedback, and, according to Ben, decided that “this show is a good articulation of our artistic voice and what we want to do as far as pushing the bounds of typical circus performance. We’ve made a lot of shifts as acrobats since the old show and are swapping out tricks to make it fresh and present for us. Hopefully, it’s more exciting for the audience, too.”

These driven individuals are anything but couch potatoes. They tumble over one another, somersault across cushions, lower themselves from an overhead abyss, and walk on each others’ hands. From glances to grand gestures, they radiantly convey meaning through movement, briefly looking beyond the fourth wall during wacky conversation while remaining completely engrossed in their imaginary world.

I laugh in amusement, but some existential questions seep into my brain. Time passes on their sea venture, and the characters unite in a chant. With each repetition, they band together with increased confidence. They remind me of a cult. They remind me of indomitable characters on a survival show. They remind me of my own friends as we navigate life's hardships. I wonder how they muster fortitude and purpose to persist in their travels.

Adam noted, "Physical performers tend to be so big, to want big stages and applause. In this piece we are trying to bring it into a minuscule space and compel or provoke people in a different way." The team seeks to bring a greater sense of intimacy to this show. As Adam put it, "We've always been interested in this architectural element, which is inherent in acrobatics. Our original venue was a sanctuary and we wanted to complement elements that were in that space. But what's interesting [here] is that if you get really close to it, you see the foot wobble, you see the breath of the performer."

For *Almanac*, it was challenging to find some distance from the personal material. This is the first time they've granted a director full power. Adam explains that Annie Wilson was "invited because of her choreographic and personal sensibilities. One of the first things she said to us was, 'I'm an outsider. I'm willing to cut, for what serves the production.'" Having previously juggled the perspectives of director and performer, Ben finds it refreshing to focus on a single role. "A lot of our habits and tendencies are being forced to break. There can be a lot of interpersonal conflict. Annie thinks about the piece in a completely different way and it's put a lot of [valuable] material here." Production designer/producer/stage manager Robin Stamey noted, "There's something worthwhile in responding to something after it's been reworked a little."

I asked Annie about her hopes for the show. "We have an opportunity to explore more deeply the material [the original members] already touched before and became very attached to from early on. We gave ourselves the freedom in our creative process to not just perform acrobatics better, but to think through this as an unfamiliar piece, with an outside person. Who are the people we can bring together that are going to give us the spirit in the room to pick apart and make something that feels like the show is where we're at as people and artistic collaborators?"

That's where the elements of art and music became relevant.

When reimagining *LOF*, Adam described "a continuing impulse for live music." Ben continued, "We listened to a bunch of people and had some play dates with various musicians." Robin added, "We really connected with Mel [Hsu], but she's on the West Coast, 3,000 miles away, until the last week of our rehearsals. She gets [daily] videos of the show." Mel then reviews the footage and adjusts her work, "if we need a piece that has a different quality than what we were expecting."

Clancy Philbrick, the show's visual artist, displays a combination of previous work on seafaring themes and work created in response to *LOF*. Adam characterized the art installation as "the inner spirit of the work."

Adam's final words to readers about *LOF*: "Everyone should come to see it and continue to root for local dance!"

You can also visit the gallery exhibition for free, outside of show times, September 1-23. First Friday in September at The Painted Bride will feature excerpts from the show, a live acoustic set from Mel Hsu, and the opening of the gallery.

Leaps of Faith and Other Mistakes, *Almanac* Dance Circus Theatre, Painted Bride Art Center, September 9-13, 15-19, 21-23, <http://fringearts.com/event/leaps-faith-mistakes/>.

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