

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



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RUB(bing me the wrong way)

By Carolyn Merritt

"Get ready, because these girls haven't had a home for weeks. They are hungry, hot, and itching for a little attention."

-Gunnar Montana, Facebook promo for RUB

Are you there, Barbara Myerhoff? It's me, Carolyn. You famously [said](#) "when the heart is truly open, there is room for yes and no." I should know, I quote you on all my syllabi. You made me want to be a better anthropologist. I try to keep your words with me out in the world beyond the classroom. I could have used a little encouragement tonight.

How did we get here? Here being the "avant-garde strip universe" RUB co-Director Gunnar Montana describes in a recent [City Paper interview](#); a universe where [go-go girls dance "mechanical tangos" with larger-than-life plush dildos](#). Here being the age of "pube disapproval" funny feminist Caitlin Moran [glibly depicts](#), where "vagina upkeep" has become the new "stealth tax" on being a woman. (A free, modern, Western woman in the enlightened world of pro-sex feminism, that is.) Here being the medieval revival sweeping the U.S. in the form of certain Republican lawmakers, whose ideas about women's bodies, the birds and bees, and gender equality are positively chilling.

Or maybe I'm just uptight. I am, after all, as Stephen Colbert rightly [points out](#), "wrapped up in my emotions and pheromones." I am also here, trying to channel Myerhoff and leave room for yes and no.

But "avant-garde" implies boundary breaking, and RUB's message was muddled at best.

The set was otherworldly in a 1980s/ post-apocalyptic/ Mad Max (ok, 1979) sort of way. Missing ceiling panels revealed the unflattering architectural innards of the Latvian Society. Bright orange caution tape flanked the walls, covered by a carefully curated collection of "trash" painted black: gallon-size plastic water jugs, hubcaps, headless Barbies, garbage bags, vacuum filters, aerosol cans, license

plates, egg cartons, and more. The four female dancers—Fatima Kargbo, Courtney Lapresi, Maureen Mo Lynch, and Ann Marie Gover—hung like sleeping bats from the scaffold centerpiece as we entered the space.

Three of the four hail from the University of the Arts, and their training is evident. They worked hard once they awoke, maneuvering the space flawlessly in platform stilettos, changing costumes and characters numerous times, even if they eventually stripped down to something similar, in most cases neon pasties and a variety of thongs. They charmed the audience, especially the man behind me, whose “Yeah’s!” grew louder and more frequent as the night wore on. (One song in the evening’s soundtrack plugged “the more you drink, the better we look,” but honestly, these girls didn’t need any help here.)

If their characters were limited—every skit ended on a similar hypersexed-up sex-kitten note—they displayed their acting chops along the way. The dildo number was the most clever and burlesque of the evening, thanks to Ann Marie Gover’s deliberately exaggerated head-tossing, giggling and parodic teasing, of both audience and life-size member. Picture a pastied, g-stringed young woman mounting, caressing, and riding a 6-foot stuffed penis like a flexible seesaw that backbends like Gumby. (I’ll give them avant-garde in the “tango” category, because I’ve been studying the form for a decade and I’ve never seen a tango quite like this.) But in the battle between the empowered stripper and the penis, Gover was beat down. Literally. It smacked her in the face.

There were snippets of pleasing choreography, but ultimately the movement vocabulary was limited to the soft-porn lines of Victoria’s Secret meets MTV meets Striptease meets the current pole dancing craze meets.... you get it, right? They are experts of the straddle, the arched back, the hair-tossing headroll, the pole slide-cum-dance, the ever so slightly opened mouth, the pelvic thrust turned full-body undulation, the bouncing release into the open-kneed kneel as fingers stroke long tresses, the catfight, the feigned bi-curious girl-on-girl action, ranging from mildly convincing kissing to facesitting. I think this is the part where we question our sexuality and artistic ideals. At least, that’s what the marketing materials promise. I couldn’t but help think of Julianne Moore’s frustrated explanation of the inauthenticity of lesbian porn in [The Kids Are All Right](#), as I pondered whether this girl-on-girl action was really crafted for the purpose of intellectual stimulation.

As for the aesthetic, I found it more clichéd than “dark,” cloaked in the veneer of grunge, but fairly predictable in the end. In one of the last numbers of the evening, the women became headless creatures, their anonymous bodies covered by milk crates. This evolved into the baby-oil-infused finale, in which they drenched themselves and one another in the stuff, rubbed all over, and writhed around on the floor together.

Overall, I had trouble locating the questions raised by RUB and I found some of the promotional language troubling (see opening quote). For all the talk of [subverting traditional notions of strip clubs](#) and [infusing the art world with strip tease and eroticism](#), the work’s imagery was ambivalent at best. Montana asserts that many of his dancer friends fall into stripping after graduation because of the economy. The Fringe is not a big money-maker, so RUB is less about dancers’ livelihoods, and possibly more about women’s ownership of our bodies. But the all-out action doesn’t help define the all-too-fuzzy line that separates celebrating female prowess from self-exploitation.

Or maybe girls just want to have fun.

RUB, Gunnar Montana and Jazmin Zieroff. *Latvian Society*, 531 N. Seventh St. Sept. 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 20, 21 at midnight, September 16, 20 at 10pm, <http://livearts-fringe.ticketleap.com/rub/#view=calendar>

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