

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



hoto: Andrej Lamut

Cowboys Chugging Red Bull in Iraq

by Mira Treatman

Before seeing *Pursuit of Happiness* I believed mass media and culture, generally speaking, bred intergenerational ignorance. The epic two-hour escape by Nature Theatre of Oklahoma (USA) and EnKnap Group (Slovenia) provided ever more evidence that the U.S. encourages perpetual pissing contests between Peter Pan politicians that contribute to unnecessary wars and domestic terror rooted in three-hundred-plus years of white supremacy and xenophobia.

Thankfully, at least, Americans look good doing it. Ever since the [rise of denim as the staple cloth of the Great West](#), Americans cultivated sex appeal in the midst of violence. Denim is the fabric of work and sex, durable yet pliable enough to kill while wearing. This struggle between sex and death electrified each and every moment of the long, winding *Pursuit* in Drexel University's Mandell Theater.

The curtain rises on a country western shoot-'em bar. The bartender is dressed as a Mariachi performer, replete with a wide-brim sombrero and thick mustache. A cowgirl, with her back turned to the audience, stands in bootcut jeans and heeled boots leaning on one leg, the other leg bent and cocked. The musculature of her derriere in dungarees is front and center in this first of many tableaux emblematic of Manifest Destiny meets Britney Spears Americanisms; again sex and death are smashed together.

The first act of the play is a string of tightly choreographed fight scenes by the ensemble. They are the virtuosic dancers of EnKnap, who play down their near perfection in favor of characterized slapstick. Tightly timed foley effects for their slaps, gunshots, pounces, and advances round out the constant barrage of violent stage fighting.

Over time, the slapstick bar shenanigans transition into proper cowboy line dances. All of these numbers exist in a universe of clean fours—quarter- or common-time box steps, an even-numbered ensemble of dancers creating symmetrical [tangrams](#) in step with one another. Occasionally, they break the symmetry to partner with one another or take a solo. Musically, the square dances represent a transatlantic transmission of culture from central Europe to the western United States and back to EnKnap in Slovenia, now on tour internationally.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the Mariachi bartender leaves his post, and in a surreal turn of events, mutinies the whole show by breaking the fourth wall. He carries on with an hourlong narration that comprises the rest of *Pursuit*. He reveals his desire to produce a film about and starring his friends, the cowboys, in a bizarre Red Bull-powered story of cowboys fighting against Iraqi insurgents. Then they drink more Red Bull. The energy drink jokes only land because of the incessant repetition.

With the bartender narrating his film treatment as a one-man show, the rest of the ensemble infuses the action with further movement and dances. A new movement motif—somehow an awkward belly roll, krumping, and a seductive full-bodied undulation at once—is vividly American, but very much a departure from the country line dancing. Often, the motif is triggered by mentions of Red Bull, adding truly demented mass-market flair to the wilds of this Western.

Interplayed over the storyline suddenly set in Iraq, the sexuality of the motif hammers home the message that sex and death, desire and violence are nearly interchangeable in this world. The overarching result? Comedy, sheer brilliant comedy, until the other shoe drops and I'm left with a haunting aftertaste: the war is, of course, violent. Each wound is represented by a red boa with each performer donning another campy accessory. There were a lot of red feathers fluttering around by the end of the night. The camp doesn't diminish the bloodshed.

Exuberant, indulgent, incoherent, vivacious, violent—*Pursuit of Happiness* rarely made sense, but crucially shone the mirror back on this American audience. We all know those clowns on the stage.

[Pursuit of Happiness](#), Mandell Theater. 2019 Philadelphia Fringe Festival. September 20-21.

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