

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Daniel Kontz

Instant Appeal

by Mira Treatman

Nicole Burgio commanded Almanac Dance Circus Theatre's first [collectively devised](#) solo work, *xoxo moongirl*. Dubbed an autobiographical circus fantasia, the sixty-minute movement play chronicled the performer-creator's recent experiences of domestic violence in her family. Almanac told this story with integrity while still displaying its commercially appealing aerial tricks and jaw-dropping acrobatics.

Burgio directly addressed a packed Christ Church Neighborhood House on opening night. A week before, speaking on the phone about her process, she told me, "Words and I don't get along very well. I have quite a difficult time expressing myself. I stumble, I can't think of the words I want to say...The minute I get into the air, I feel safe. The best way that I know how to tell a story is through movement and not through words. There is this sigh of relief like, 'Okay, I'm here, I'm thirty feet up, no one can get me. It's all good.'" Sitting in the audience, I could not detect any of the nervousness about speaking she purported to feel. As expected, Burgio's ease of movement in the air appeared second nature. Her comfort high up on a trapeze surely stems from decades of gymnastic and circus training, and perhaps also derives from her studies in psychology. She holds a master's degree in clinical and counseling health psychology.

Burgio mounted a nondescript wooden table at the center of the set, playfully toying with the possibility of falling or knocking over her prop, a glass of milk. She described her family: Mom, Dad, little sister Danielle, and herself. Mom was a nurse who worked the night shift at times, made baked ziti with sausage and peppers, and spoke with an accent originating along the mid-Atlantic stretches of I-95.

Burgio played a version of herself and, as such, her distinctive appearance was significant throughout. Her voluminous hair was pulled back in a stylized bouffant, a nod to Marie Antoinette or Snooki or a country music diva. A wide-eyed gaze defined her strong stage presence. Where she looked, we followed. In her stillness, she held our gaze. A noticeable beauty mark rested below her eye, adding a charming punctuation to an already expressive face. This visual similarity was the first of several references to Marilyn Monroe.

Missing from the details was the father, a present absence that wielded violent energy toward the other characters. Burgio repeatedly referred to the turning point in her family's experience. In our phone conversation she remarked that, "a year and half ago...my dad really went over the edge and hit my mom to the point where I had to evacuate her from the house...The encounter was serious [enough that] my mother nearly died."

The aggressor had little stage time throughout *moongirl*, while the recipient of the violence was fully developed. The choice to focus on Burgio's mother was harrowing to me, leaving the dangerous father figure in the shadows where, arguably, he belonged. An entire aerial dance in red silks was dedicated to a riveting embodiment of Burgio's mother. Performed thirty feet in the air, Burgio moved up and down the silks effortlessly, never breaking character through each trick. In an unsubtle visual metaphor, Burgio appeared to fall out of the sky through the silks, a grim portrayal of a hurt woman's descent.

After the dramatic fall, a motif of white design elements emerged: the cup of milk, white pants reminiscent of her mother's scrubs, confetti, an artful projection of the moon, and serendipitous puffs of gymnastic chalk that appeared each time Burgio ascended a circus apparatus. Through stealthy stagecraft, a hoop fell from rigging above and the kitchen table transformed into a fan that blew up toward Burgio as she hung from the hoop, creating a very literal Marilyn Monroe moment with her red dress fluttering up. During this breathtaking dance, reminiscent of Burgio's near-perfect solo in Almanac's [Exile 2588](#), the rapt audience feasted on the visual delight as the violent storyline still unfolded. This is what Almanac does singularly and consistently: displaying the universal wow factor of a human being in a spatial relationship to the earth that is not possible without stage magic.

From start to finish, the audience reacted as if at a sporting event, with uninhibited exclamations: "Ooh," "Ahh," "No way!" and "Oh, holy crap!" These responses, more than anything else, are to me what establish this work as popularly successful. The audience wasn't limited by theatre conventions of holding applause and watching in silence. They were moved enough to respond in real time, which is true evidence of *moongirl's* immediacy and relevance. Almanac told a story that vilifies a violent man, but the darkness didn't appear to alienate. Rather, it drew everyone to rally around the heroine, bringing the opening night audience to a resounding standing ovation.

[xoxo moongirl](#). Almanac Dance Circus Theatre, Christ Church Neighborhood House, June 26–28.

By Mira Treatman

July 25, 2018