

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Melissa Kelly

FIGMAGO: Dances For Eternal Children

by Mira Treatman

[Brian Sanders' JUNK](#)'s *FIGMAGO* commenced with a studio tour by a polished, [LeCoq-trained](#) actor, Travis Draper, wearing paint-stained clothes and a harness. Portraying a muralist, he welcomed the audience to the Studio of [Meg Saligman](#), the preeminent mural artist and Sanders' collaborator on this immersive theatre experience. Draper had the classic LeCoq swagger that can sometimes shroud vulnerability in favor of creating a pretty picture, much like a muralist painting on a decaying building. This ambitious collaboration by artists whose work I respect was a skillful application of audience-accessible guilt.

According to its website, *FIGMAGO* opened "portals unto the paths of your creative being" with the performers as "gatekeepers of your imagination," offering the audience insight into what it's like to be a muralist. This statement is a bit contradictory. Doesn't the imagination by definition require freedom from gates and keepers?

Halfway through Draper's tour monologue, the artist herself, Saligman, arrived with a bag of take-out food. A joyful persona, she penetrated the tour as if unaware the show started, and jubilantly greeted those in the audience she recognized: her cousins, her hair stylist. I am not convinced the artist's presence was a rehearsed part of the show, but it was a delightful break from the monologue. I wish Sanders could have made a cameo too.

We proceeded through a mysterious wardrobe door, chock full of fake furs and whimsical textiles. We'd entered *FIGMAGO*, a maze of rooms each built with a distinct concept. First was an oblong hunting den with an austere table framed by a backlit screen. Amelia Rosa Estrada* handed us slips of paper and Sharpies, instructing us to "draw what we saw." Estrada and another dancer, Chelsea Prunty, performed a table dance rich with stealthy partnering maneuvers and tricks. An inebriated audience member called, "Take it off!"

Next was a chamber, lit like a low-overhead office, with easily fifty gallons of sand on the floor. Draper instructed the audience to use

spaghetti colanders to sift through the floor to find treasure that “speaks to us.” We quickly found broken pieces of colored glass, which we were encouraged to arrange on an overhead projector. He asked, “What do you see?,” as our selected glass pieces were projected on the far wall. I saw the same audience member standing in the gratuitous indoor beach ask if there’s a place he can vomit.

In the grotto next door, a dancer in a polka dotted lizard costume, which made her appear like an impossibly petite alien, emerged out of dark shadows. Audience members touched her without hesitation. Estrada and Draper began to duet on a garage door and chain link fence. They hoisted custom steel chairs onto the door and while getting splashed with water, danced in unison to display the sexy virtuosity I expect from Sanders’ choreography. The duet segued into a well-deserved solo for Estrada. Her material encapsulated everything excellent about Sanders’ work: keen musicality to well-curated music with a heavy pulse, tricks to demonstrate highly cultivated performance skills, and an unapologetic sensuality inherent to dancing in the presence of an audience.

After the solo, Draper handed out bespoke puzzle pieces in fuzzy bags reminiscent of stuffed animals. The same inebriated audience member put the bag on his head and danced around, trying to entertain his friends. The crowd buzzed, shouting to one another about how to best put the puzzle together. Everyone was jazzed to see the Saligman artwork these pieces surely would create. I never saw the finished puzzle because I chose to watch another duet between Estrada and Draper happening concurrently on the opposite wall.

We were welcomed into the final chamber, a cloud-like rotunda meets fantasy children’s playroom. Estrada, wearing a periwinkle unitard, danced yoga poses all while nonchalantly balancing on a glowing crystal ball. The music was somewhere between techno, house, and Enya. The studio’s ceiling was covered with plush pearl-colored fabric, creating a magical effect of coziness. The feeling of being under a soft overhead space reminded me of other JUNK shows, and I wondered if it was in place to obscure the rigging equipment above.

Draper emerged after the final dance to provide a verbal ending to the show. In the hour long performance, he was the only *FIGMAGO* cast member to speak in complete sentences. He remarked, “This is a safe space, so I can go put on a skirt.” After being prompted by Draper to explore the final room, the same inebriated man turned some of his clothes inside out and put on a tulle skirt from the playroom clothes rack. He danced gleefully behind a backlit screen. He finally got a rise out of his adult son. The father’s antics until this point had grated on me, but now I realized that perhaps he was exactly for whom *FIGMAGO* was created.

[FIGMAGO](#). Brian Sanders’ JUNK, Meg Saligman Studio, July 20 – September 22.

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August 23, 2018