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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jauhien Sasnou

Superterranean Goes Postdramatic

by Barбора P?íhodová

In a quest to reach new audiences for performing arts in Philadelphia, [Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) are joining forces and exploring how dance writing and discourse can provide new perspectives on theater. Since May 2018, tD writers have been lending their varied backgrounds, interests, and approaches to criticism to professional works of theater in Philadelphia. Let us know what you think in the comments!

A tall, brightly lit rectangular box is placed at the center of the stage, filled with draped, rich white fabric. In a series of flashes, the brilliant lighting (by Barbara Samuels) accentuates the plentiful folds and creases and dramatizes its soft textures. Something like heaps of tissue paper, stalactites in a cave, and an intricate lacework, the box installation is simply beautiful to look at. But as the scene progresses, I realize some of the layers breathe with life, and a performer's body (or bodies?) slowly and softly moves underneath them. With the deceptive play between light and shadow, I'm not sure where the human body begins and ends. It's all one gently pulsating mass that unsettles the boundaries between the animate and inanimate worlds; between humans and their environment. This is the opening scene of *Superterranean*, a new production by Pig Iron, created with leading artists Mimi Lien (conception, design, scenario) and Dan Rothenberg (direction, scenario).

Pig Iron, the founding fathers of devised theatre in Philly, have made no secret that moving beyond "realistic," text-based theatre is one of the driving artistic forces of the company. *Superterranean* takes these efforts to the next level and hypnotizes with a wordless, surreal stage meditation on the complex relationship between the human body and the spaces it creates and inhabits. It was devised in collaboration with a group of nine performers (Rolls André, Isaac Calvin, Evelyn Chen, Jenn Kidwell, Mel Krodman, Chelsea Murphy, Dito van Reigersberg, Tony Torn, and Saori Tsukada). [Lien](#), an award-winning set designer with a background in architecture, has a long history working with the company, but this is the first time that her vision has become the principal element of the performance. The piece grew out of her "[obsession](#)" with urban infrastructure and how enormous structures like subway tunnels, pipes, dams, refineries,

and treatment plants make humans feel.

It seems almost counter-intuitive that, in the momentum of site-specific projects that provoke our sensitivity towards spaces and places around us, this architecture-driven piece takes place in the traditional proscenium-arch black box of 2300 Arena. However, Lien knows how to emphasize the space's presence and affective power. She gradually reveals its capacities: the hyper focus of the opening scene alternates with a stage-wide tiled interior, its grey central structure evoking a water plant tower. The fixture stands at the center of the performers' action, both literally and figuratively, with small openings that sometimes exude steam (and other times push out feces).

The performance is a series of images and actions, poetic and visceral, that, together with rich sonic environments (original music and sound design by Lea Bertucci), shape its dream-like structure. And this is no daydream: the humans seem to be disconnected, trapped in their parallel worlds. They sit alone with their heads bent down, or embracing the tower in a gesture of desperation. Moments of contact between them are scarce and not very comforting. In one such moment, two performers, fully covered in plastic overalls that morph them into faceless masses (costumes by Olivera Gajic) dance to mundane elevator music. Human waste is evoked repeatedly: one of the performers frantically jogs around the tower until she vomits with exhaustion (this moment is staged rather realistically), her body crooked and compulsively shaking. In another, a woman in a long fur coat painfully tears off what seems to be a colostomy bag from her stomach.

The performance space opens up into the back and side stages for the finale, exposing its guts in their vastness. The lighting bars are lowered down and the performers pace around the space in different directions, fragmented again. *Superterranean* is a supreme example of postdramatic theatre, and a powerful affective experience not to be forgotten.

[Superterranean](#), Pig Iron Theatre Company / Mimi Lien, 2300 Arena, 2019 Fringe Festival, Sept 5-15.

By Barbora Píhřodov
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