

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Koof Ibi

More Than Just Girls' Games: Lily Kind's "Wolfthicket"

by Joseph Ahmed

Riffling through the program's 46 footnotes^[1], I start to think that I am settling in for an academic lecture.

The opposite is true.

Performers start by popping in and out of every door in a Buster Keaton-style bit labeled "The Door Joke." *Wolfthicket*, directed by Lily Kind and choreographed in collaboration with its seven plus performers^[2], is a schoolyard game on a sugar high, a vaudeville show, a deconstruction of childhood "girls games", a meditation on Afro Diasporic influence on pop culture, and a sheer blast. The ensemble cast of Amalia Colón-Nava, Maddie Hopfield*, Chelsea Murphy, Lillian Ransijn, Dylan Smythe, Eva Steinmetz, Elizabeth Weinstein, and Kind deliver raw and exuberant performances.

The cast, dressed in patchwork tops and vibrant [Biencaton](#) pants, move through game after game like an ecstatic amoeba. They stretch into a line to deliver an ever-accelerating repetition of the almost-naughty "Miss Suzie had a steamboat" rhyme^[3], eventually breaking down into chaos. They surround a series of [waacking](#) soloists. They involve the audience in charades to "Guess what's in the refrig-er-a-tor"^[4]. They rampage, swim, and fall across the room in a tight example of ensemble attunement.

Finally, the cast don black garments and slow the tempo. The change follows Smythe's haunting rendition of Dolly Parton's "[Little Sparrow](#)", sung while draped across Kind's and Ransijn's^[5] backs. The party becomes an elegy, the contraction and expansion of bodies recontextualized by the darker outfits and reddening lighting^[6]. I think of recent events in [Texas](#), about how often women's bodies are subject to regulation and violence.

The program for *Wolfthicket* is a major part of the show. It includes rigorous notes from Lily's own writing as well as academic sources,

including her own graduate advisor Dr. Gale Jackson^[7]. It's not totally dry though -- footnote 17 is just "**TIERRA WHACK**"^[8], with footnotes 18-19 succinctly elaborating, "**IS AMAZING**". Much of the text explores how the African Diaspora has influenced almost every aspect of the performance, from waacking and other dance forms^[9] to hand-clapping and ring games.

I do feel some discomfort that a show with so much writing about minstrelsy and black dance styles, includes no black performers^[10]. However, unlike many other works by white creators connecting with black art forms, Kind knows her history and has the receipts to prove it. If it isn't clear already^[11], I'm starting to wish every performance came with footnotes.

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[Wolfthicket](#), directed by Lily Kind in collaboration with the performers, Mertz Hall at The Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion, Aug. 21 – Sept. 5.

^[1] Yes, 46. They're integral to the piece and have clearly inspired this writer.

^[2] Past and current collaborators and performers can be found on Kind's [website](#).

^[3] "Miss Suzie had a steamboat / The steamboat had a bell / Miss Suzie went to heaven and the steamboat went to--/--hello operator / Please give me number 9..."

^[4] It's pancakes and fried rice.

^[5] Lillian has an early solo that can perhaps be described as a gremlin seducing a lightbulb. It brought the house down.

^[6] Adam Stone's lighting makes great use of the DIY venue. A central bulb that lowers and rises, pulled by a performer, is an ingenious touch (see footnote 5)

^[7] In footnote 39, Dr. Jackson writes about children playing hand-clapping games as being "poetry in motion", a description that feels apt for Kind's work.

^[8] Tierra's song "Only Child" features as one of many which Kind has carefully curated and explicated in the program.

^[9] Kind helped develop [Urban Movement Arts](#) with Vince Johnson, and served as co-captain of adult programming until 2020.

^[10] That I know of. As a multi-racial person I'm aware that visual identification of race is a fool's errand.

^[11] Case in point.

By Joseph Ahmed
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