

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kevin Monko

Close the Gate!

by Kilian Kröll

A menacing drone throbbed in my ears as a pack of backlit dancers ran from the back of Pier 9's turbine hall to the center-stage octagonal structure. The music in Brian Sanders' *The Gate Reopened* – simulated heartbeats, Oriental strings, thunderous bass lines – told you when to feel something. The audience, drenched from a late-summer storm, broke into cheers. Brian Sanders' JUNK has serious fans, and this well-loved Philly company delivered a show that matched the weather drama outside.

The star of *The Gate* was a silo-like structure (designed by Pedro Silva and reconstructed by Conrad Bender) made of steel poles, metal fencing, a wood-and-chain trapeze, and four zig-zagging ladders, all atop a 5-foot covered base with a hidden trampoline. The audience sat around all sides of the set, which functioned at once as animal cage, floodgate, circus arena, junk yard, and temple of worship, top-lit (by an anonymous lighting designer) in stark white and industrial blues.

I generally don't like to be told what to feel, so I started imagining the dance without the uncredited sound score. In fact, the dripping rain from the waning storm leaked into the hall and splashed off the tin roof, in my mind providing all the sound necessary. The eight dancers – two women and six men – placed themselves symmetrically in couples around the structure's base, lifting and pulling each other in deliberate, symmetrical fashion onto the base, up the ladders, up the fencing, into the cage, onto the trapeze. They started off fully clothed in dark pants and sweaters, but it wouldn't be a Brian Sanders show if the choreographer didn't show off his dancers' ripped bods. There's a titillating tension that accompanies a strip-tease, one that silence would have dramatically amplified.

The Gate continued to hover at the crossroads of Cirque de Soleil and the Chippendales, with acrobatic dancing in progressive states of undress. During the hottest scenes I felt cool arousal: two women pressing their bare chests against the other on a see-sawing ladder suspended from the ceiling; the pack of male dancers, sweat glistening on their well-defined muscle groups, ascending in boxer briefs from the base of the stage over the top of the metal fence. Billy Robinson's physicality stood out with his use of intentional pauses,

smart momentum, and an internal sense of rhythm that made the most of the never-stopping choreography. Otherwise, the cast seemed constantly busy, gracefully focusing on performing their hangs, balances, falls and suspensions without injury. (Universal health care for dancers!)

During the show's pivotal moment, the ensemble wrapped a wet-sprayed, tanga-clad Robinson in a water-filled plastic tarp, and a chain hook hoisted the package like a knapsack into the air. A moment later, the captive bored a hole into the bottom of the tarp with his foot, slipped out with the water and fell into the bellows of the base. The use of liquid augmented the raw, sensual quality of the performance, which gets an A for consistently following an idea to its end.

This piece was remounted after its original Live Arts success in 2003. A decade later, I am thinking about how companies are pushing the boundaries of physical performance. In the [pole-dancing](#) category, we've seen RUB in this year's Fringe. In the [acrobatic circus](#) category, Montreal's Sequence 8 is anticipated to blow minds. *The Gate Reopened* lingers in its own niche: (homo)erotic, athletic, sleek, dramatic, object-based, physically risky. It's also not-quite-circus, not-quite-modern-dance, not-quite-STOMP, and not-quite-Vegas, but it's home-grown eye candy with its own appeal.

The Gate Reopened, Brian Sanders' JUNK, Sept. 14-16, 18-22. Final show Sept. 22, 10pm at Pier 9, livearts-fringe.org

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