

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Tonight I watch a mantis-limbed woman...

by Patricia Graham

Swings, hoops and ropes hang expectantly in the rectangular cavern that is Philadelphia Soundstages, drawing my gaze up and seeming to wait for a life giving touch. Tangle Movement Arts, a confident troupe of women aerialist, dance and theater artists enter one at a time and don't take long to get vertical, as in ascending straight up one rope of a pair, and transitioning laterally to come down the second rope in ever more complex maneuvers. Their hand-like feet grasp the rope on the way up; hips and knees hook to support inversions and twists on the descent.

The aerial work lends itself to imagery and weightlessness beyond the reach of earthbound dancers. Performer Kate Aid hangs in delicious suspension using two pieces of equipment, her feet resting delicately on a swing as her upper back is supported under the curve of a hoop; her spine is buoyant in its supported arc. Individual voices and style come to the fore through a series of solos. Tiffany Holder is dynamic, finding ever-inventive ways to work with military-straight legs, hanging from a single elbow in stillness and later going through full revolutions over a swing bar, legs and body held in a profiled walking pose. Lauren Rile Smith has the presence of a panther on the ropes with the sensibility of a poet. After rising to the swing, she pauses for a moment, then gestures with one foot--the type of gesture we are accustomed to seeing a dancer, not a trapeze artist, perform. Working on the trapeze, she projects a lucid understanding of how the aerial and dance theater worlds exist seamlessly. As Smith works in the air, a chorus of women are moving as a group, "a terre," very slowly and in silhouette upstage, directly in line with her suspended figure. It is not only a resonant image, but an affecting use of contrasting spatial relationships and rhythms.

At other times integrating the group with a solo figure across disciplines is more problematic; the performers bring dance sensibility onto the equipment, with varying degrees of success. At issue as well is establishing, when not airborne, a group identity that feels organic to the piece. Faces and gestures sometimes slip into a mysteriously melodramatic mode. One performer's hand gesture inexplicably takes on great power, as she pushes her palm away and "moves" another person on the far side of the stage. It seems like silent movie pantomime, which could be an interesting direction for them done all out, but feels out of context here.

It is enjoyable to see Tangle take on the challenge of interdisciplinary work, with their strong sense of self and community. The lighting is exceptional, shadows dancing across the walls throughout the piece. The final imagery is quite wonderful - upstage aerialists are in full light, while center and down stage performers are edge-cut - like paper silhouettes. The strength of the visual image is undermined by the vague non-ending of the music, but this is all to the good on the learning end, as Tangle creates new worlds of relationships through their experimental work.

Break/Drift/Resist, Tangle Movement Arts, Sept. 6th 8pm, Sept. 7th 3 & 8pm, Philadelphia Soundstages, Philadelphia Fringe Festival, www.philadelphiafringe.net, www.tangle-arts.com

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