

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Hunter Canning

Cheering for the Owls in the Pony Palace

by Ellen Chenoweth

I've been surrounded by football for as long as I can remember, but I've never once had the desire to play until Tina Satter and Half Straddle came along. I finally saw some appeal; you're part of this special club, all of you sharing the same secret language, and working towards the same goal, with great seriousness and drive, and an abundance of camaraderie.

And maybe I could finally imagine myself involved in this popular but beleaguered national sport because in Satter's play, all roles are populated by women and transgendered folks. It doesn't hurt that the wide receiver, in this kick-ass parallel universe, gets to wear gold moon boots. The typical sports drama is so rife with predictability and tired tropes that it's just plain delicious to see them subverted, with dialogue like "I thought this player was a golden unicorn in the last game." The presentation is recognizable, but slightly askew, and ten times more fun.

For 75 minutes, we visited this universe, in which the assistant coach Maureen is vying for the top coaching spot, wooing parents with pineapple socials. The two cheerleaders manage to avoid all clichés about cheerleaders, while also avoiding their opposites; they are neither snotty, nor approachable, they are simply a new world unto themselves. The live marching band has four members, with a solo flute playing a mournful Lady Gaga *Paparazzi* melody, or the whole band wailing on some subtly Middle Eastern sounding funk. The pony palace of the title is the field house, or the football field, or sometimes the whole game of football itself, it seems. When there is a game going on, the movement is slowed down and stylized, but still intensely physical. (One cast member gave a shout out to dance pioneer Steve Paxton in the post-show talkback, referencing his practice of slowing things down to call attention to nuances.)

Every once in a while I got a little restless, thinking to myself, “but where are we going? Are we going anywhere?” and then I would get pulled back in by a funny cheer (“fum-ble fum-ble, did that make you humble?”) or some amusing owl gesture (owls have tail feathers in this reality), and I would relax again, content to just spend some time in the world of the pony palace.

At a time when the NFL is in desperate need of some alternate storylines and fresh thinking, I wish that Roger Goodell and other league honchos could hang out in the pony palace for a while as well. The Half Straddle Owls provide an alternate creation that’s not just fun and refreshing, but also offers a vision of a way forward for the sport, one in which traditional values are simultaneously preserved and updated.

In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL, Half Straddle, FringeArts, September 17-19.

By Ellen Chenoweth
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