

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Hallie Martenson

What Did I Just See? *Show No Show* as Meta-Performance

by Karl Surkan

Show No Show is undoubtedly a geographically odds-defying collaboration between Philadelphia choreographer/dancer Gabrielle Revlock and Aleksandr Frolov, who hails from Yekaterinburg, Russia. Though clearly a choreographed work, *Show No Show* retains elements of contact improvisation and reflects a shared love of the quirkiness and unpredictability local audiences have come to expect from Revlock.

The dance explores partnering as reflects power differentials and a wide range of emotional dynamics, including aggression, playfulness, lust, fear, jealousy, connection, and separation. Even the title suggests a kind of experiment: is this a show, or not? And what is being shown? We are drawn into scenarios, many absurd, that nevertheless feel genuine in the push me/pull you power play between the two dancers.

"What is good?" Revlock calls out, literally standing on Frolov, who is bent and slumped into the floor. "What is bad? What should one live for?" He responds in Russian, perhaps echoing her in his own language: an incompatibility. Communication attempts and failures echo throughout the piece, as notes are written, read, crumpled, and discarded by the performers.

"The answer is: You will die, and all will end," Revlock continues. "You will die and know everything or cease asking." Perhaps the most explicitly philosophical element of the dance, this existential answer compels us to sit with ambiguity, engage in the moment, and assess what we see. There are no definitive answers, but the human condition is a shared one, despite communication errors and language barriers.

Revlock's character often dominates in *Show No Show*. Following a dance-fight with a large window screen held between them, she rejects Frolov's overtures, pushing him backwards and pinning him against the far wall before pulling the curtain over him. He escapes,

covering, to a small closet-like space, now transformed into a four-legged beast on hands and knees. Kneeling there, he paces and spins, further tormented by Revlock, who prods him from a distance with a stick, laughing.

Dragging Frolov from his cage, Revlock moves him across the stage, where she begins to teach him a child's hand clapping game. This devolves into aggressive hitting and shoving, another language breakdown as the "beast" fails to grasp the lesson. Ultimately Frolov is left slumped on the floor as Revlock gleefully performs a solo. She flits about the stage, eventually backing out a side door, arms outstretched, so that only her fluttering fingers could be seen.

Frolov stirs, beginning to assert himself again in the dance, but Revlock is having none of it. Grabbing a megaphone, she shouts: "Listen up! Get against the wall! Put your hands on the wall, now!" she yells. He is happily oblivious, or perhaps choosing to ignore her, reaching and kicking, still in motion. She becomes increasingly irate, full of insult and expletives.

The last half of *Show No Show* contains some of the most provocative imagery of the evening, as the exploration of boundaries focuses closely on the body. Frolov plays the role of an OB/GYN, examining and performing a surgical procedure on Revlock. They travel the stage together, his hands and arms, scrubbed and sterile, held in an awkward vertical position to prevent contact with anything. Arriving back in the "exam room," he takes her pulse; the scene culminates in a lustful collapse over the table.

Despite the often whimsical and even slapstick feel of the early part of this work (or perhaps because of it), Revlock and Frolov have secured audience investment in these two characters. Revlock dances, head covered by a tablecloth, until Frolov comes near and she transfers the cloth to his head, leaving him wandering, blindly trying to find his way back to her. This final scene is all the more haunting because we want to see these two dancers on stage together.

Grabbing the megaphone once more, she repeatedly taunts him: "I'm over here," before quickly moving away – a game of Marco Polo. Finally, she sets the megaphone down and exits altogether, leaving it on. "I'm over here," it continues to call from the corner of the stage. He lurches about, stumbling into walls and furniture. Blind, alone, he too departs, leaving us staring at an empty space. "I'm over here." Revlock's voice echoes in the silence.

But there is no one there; the "show" has ended.

Show No Show, Gabrielle Revlock and Aleksandr Frolov, FringeArts, March 24-26, 8pm.

By Karl Surkan (1969-2023)

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