

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lars Jan

Cracking Up In Chaos: Pandaemonium

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Nichole Canuso's [Pandaemonium](#), one of FringeArts' curated shows this year, is practically impossible to embrace conceptually, let alone to respond to in words—a powerful but far too limiting medium for this work. Roving from the despair of a marriage break-up to the hilarity of a slapstick sit-com, from the desert as vacation hotspot to the desert as atom-bomb testing site, from the kinesthetic reality of live performance to the imaginative abstraction of dance video, from this stage at this moment at the FringeArts theater to Earth as a cosmic speck, from human relationships to science to art, the work traverses mind-blowing scale in the course of its one-hour duration. I know that's a long sentence, but it gives some sense of the non-stop pace, change, and expanses of this performance.

Where to start? As the audience takes their seats, we see a large screen dominating the upstage, playing scene after scene of explosions, demolition, bomb-testing. The three surrounding stage walls show photographic scenes of desert, rocks, bits of development, a pyramidal structure, endless expanses of sandy landscape. Close to the screen stand two mannequins (male and female) in summer clothing, musician/composer Xander Duell (seated on an enclosed swing), a picnic cooler, a grill, and two chaise-lounge chairs. On these stretch Nichole Canuso and Geoff Sobelle, also in vacation-wear. They begin to move, he reaching to the cooler for a beer. We see the mannequins, naked, on the screen's desert land-and-skyscape, but soon these pass to reveal the live-action movements of the two performers, on opposite sides of the stage, but fused into a confrontation on the video screen. How do you do that? I can't say, so go see the show.

The plot thickens as the live-dancers' failure to face one another in reality reveals the story of what I took to be an alcoholic break-up. This entails a violent set of fantasies that result in each performer embracing, stripping, and ultimately dismantling their mannequin counterparts in a hilarious scene of emotional destruction. My God, their lives are a mess!—and so is the set. In one terrifying scene, Canuso appears to be driving a car through an endless night of tearful misery as headlights (actually a pair of stage lights manipulated by Sobelle) pursue and threaten her. Moments of reconciliation raise my hopes—he tosses his booze bottle aside and seems engulfed in tremor-ridden prayer, they meet center stage and have odd encounters with a conical pendulum that swings above them, creating kaleidoscopic patterns of beautiful movement on the screen as we see the dancers threaten and wrestle with their lives. On the screens,

these same two characters appear as robed shamans dancing incantations in the desert as the mannequins loom over them, then fall to pieces in a cannibalistic holocaust.

The marriage eventually falls completely apart, both on the screen (she drives up to their presumed desert home with her folder of divorce papers, which he signs with another chug of beer), and on the stage, where their own shadows loom, black and impenetrable, against opposite sides of the desert landscape.

Pandaemonium/Early Morning Opera, directed by Lars Jan. Nichole Canuso Dance Company, FringeArts Theater, Sept. 14-18.
<http://fringearts.com/event/pandaemonium-2/>

See also Beau Hancock's interview with Nichole Canuso [here](#).

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