



Northwest New Works: campy, clever, and unpredictable

The New Works Festival at On the Boards, which started last weekend and continues Friday-Sunday (June 11-13), highlights some of Seattle's finest choreographers.

By Spider Kedelsky

June 09, 2010.

Never again will I look at the catwalk in a fashion show and not think of the short chunky guy in the Utilikilt and high heels, or the tall guy wearing plaid golf pants and a tiny orange watch cap perched on his shaved head. They and 10 other men and women of various sizes, shapes and colors, some trained dancers and some not, appeared in Mark Haim's "This Land is Your Land," the clever and droll piece that was the highlight of the first weekend of mainstage performances at On the Boards' annual Northwest New Works Festival.

An experienced choreographer with wide-ranging interests, Haim here exercised his campy side to the max in this funny send-up of fashionistas, body perceptions, sexual identity, and America's consumption culture. He is credited in the program with the "concept" rather than the choreography, and though this work was the least dancey of the four premieres on the evening's program, in structure and form it had the surest hand guiding it.

Five or six on stage at a time, the performers parade their stuff towards the audience and back, always in front of a brightly colored screen, each with a lidded coffee cup in hand. One by one they exit around the left side of the screen only to return from the other side a few minutes later in slightly altered or completely different attire.

As they exit, the performers drop their cups in a large, clear trash basket. Over time their walks get more exaggerated, sometimes with skipping and other variations. One can assume this is the result of caffeine overdoses.

The performers eventually fill the garbage with all sorts of drink cups, and change costumes and accessories many times from informal street wear, to formal dress, to men in drag, to completely undressed for a bit, to underwear, and finally everyone in basic black, with the ultimate chic accessories — handguns and Uzis.

The dance works well for two reasons. First the simple premise of the repetitive runway walk, a bit like the phase patterning of early Steve Reich music — slight overlapping variations that shift everything over time — all done to the constant beat of a medley of country and western songs.

Second is the dynamic balance Haim creates between the known and the unknown, leading to dramatic uncertainty and anticipation, and lots of fun. The next performer is going to enter from behind the screen but which will it be? We know she or he will have some costume change, but what will each be wearing or carrying, and what will their mannered walk be? We know they'll drop their cups in the garbage upon exiting, but will they miss, and what happens when the can gets full?

All of the performers have individualized expressions and walks that make me think they studied the zomboid looks and exaggerated struts of real runway models, perhaps also with quick perusals of a video of Monty Python's famed "Ministry of Silly Walks" sketch. They are all fearless in their dogged repetitions whether clothed or not, and they together make a wonderful and oddly matched ensemble.

If there was a shortcoming to the dance, it was that we catch on to the game, and the elements of suspense and repetition don't deter it from feeling a bit too long at a running time of 20 minutes.

Another bit of drollery, which opened the evening, was "couloir (trek)" performed by Danny Herter and the Invasive Species. Here Mr. Herter, who is credited with the choreography and writing, along with three intrepid accomplices, explores the mountain regions of the Northwest as if they had just alighted on another planet. Sporting backpacks and appropriate clothing, each is assigned status as a superior officer — general, captain, admiral or commander. Herter, the only man among the four, is clearly top dog.

Together they dance in blocks of unified movement, and speak in absurdist dialogue, as they perambulate through this alien landscape, made more atmospheric by Melinda Short's lighting design. With the aid of a variety of projected images of topographical maps and scenes of alpine beauty, Herter sees not a new and strange landscape, rather humans as the invasive species in an otherwise pristine environment.

The movement he creates is mostly an elementary exploration of walking steps most often done in quartet unison. The spoken dialogue back and forth has some clever lines, but Herter's two solo turns as he steps out of the action to rap at a standing microphone work less well than the interplay between all the performers.

It is rare that a dance/theater piece achieves an equitable balance between dialogue, movement, and visual media. The dancers are up to their kinetic tasks, particularly the lovely Lauren Ehnebuske-Day, but as actors they do not bring the needed technical mastery that best expresses the words.

Herter takes on the role of auteur, credited also with the music arrangement, video, and costumes. Less might have been more here, perhaps fewer images of the beautiful natural world, a more interesting musical palette, and passing on some of his performance responsibilities to the others. As the captain of the piece, he should have known he was outranked by a general and an admiral.

The evening's program was completed by two other dances, Amy O'Neal's solo, "In the Fray," and "stifle," a group work for five dancers and a live band choreographed by Marissa Rae Niederhauser.

O'Neal is an exceptional dancer and a compelling performer. She had very powerful moments in this piece depicting a woman's transformative ritual of personal purification, though at times the work was diminished by excessive pathos.

Here's a video clip showing Amy O'Neal and Jim Kent dancing in Haim's "Goldberg Variations."