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Review: A night at Northwest New Works "playful men with verve, serious women on the verge"

By Michael Upchurch
Seattle Times arts writer

The Mainstage Showcase offerings in Weekend One of On the Boards' Northwest New Works Festival broke down neatly by gender: The guys were in a playful mood, while the women were mired in soul-baring angst.

I'll take "playful," frankly "especially when it's delivered with this much discipline and verve.

If Kraftwerk were to go mountain-climbing after training at Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks, they might come up with something like Danny Herter & The Invasive Species' "couloir (trek)." Herter choreographed the moves, wrote the script, shot the video, designed the costumes and had a hand in the music for the piece. But the best thing he brought to it was his humor.

Four dancers in outdoor gear are on a climbing mission that seems to exist in their minds as much as in reality. ("That's what we do," one says. "We go up.") All four bring serious dance chops to tight-unison passages that range from nerdy robotics to loopy trudges, hops or swaggers.

The hazards of "alpinism" are outlined and the seeming paradox of being "in" the outdoors is discussed. (If you're "out," how can you be "in"?) The script cleverly fragments syntax while sacrificing momentum. In the same way, the dance links disparate steps with comic rigor. Herter's mischievous, fertile take on adventure, ambition and the odd comedown of reaching your peak whets your appetite for more from him soon.

Mark Haim's "This Land Is Your Land" is just as sharp. It's a minimalist riot of incremental change, precise as a metronome, yet kaleidoscopic in its variations on a single bare-bones move: the runway walk. To a sequence of recorded country-flavored tunes that scarcely vary in beat, six dancers stride in steady time, upstage and down, in front of a rainbow-striped backdrop.

It takes a moment to realize that with each shuttle, a dancer on the left disappears behind the backdrop while a new one appears on the right. And with every new appearance, some subtle change occurs in costume, accouterment or a

To reveal more would spoil it. Suffice it to say that Haim's dancers, poker-faced throughout, hit their marks and strike their variations with a precision that must be much harder than it looks. Thanks to their diligent execution, "This Land" ends up feeling like a fizzy celebration of all the stripes (and body types) of humanity that walk among us.

AmyO/tinyrage's "In the Fray" is a solo for artistic director Amy O'Neal that takes her from prison garb to other guises, attaining Dionysian pitch on the way. O'Neal can certainly flail, and sob, and crotch-grab. But all the emoting felt a