

Dance troupe Chunky Move splits greatness in two

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White Bird/Chris Roesing Australia's Chunky Move unleashes controlled chaos and thoughtful fun in its season finale for the White Bird Uncaged dance series.

From one perspective, Chunky Move's "Two-Faced Bastard," is singularly terrific: a smart, funny, challenging, seemingly spontaneous and yet deceptively well-planned work of movement theater.

From the opposite perspective -- well, that's hard to say. Unless, of course, you go to see the show a second time, and sit at the other end of the gymnasium at the 10th Avenue Athletic Club in the downtown YWCA.

That's because "Two-Faced Bastard" is about dualities.

The Australian dance troupe explores this theme by presenting two simultaneous views of the action, to an audience split between two sides of the space, with a curtain of sorts running through the middle of the stage floor.

More precisely, it's not a curtain but a set of ceiling-to-floor vertical blinds that block or obscure the view of whatever's going on beyond them.

And so while you watch what's in front of you on one side of the blinds, you can hear and sometimes catch glimpses of what the folks on the other end of the room are taking in.

The show is the last in the inaugural season of the White Bird Uncaged dance series, and it might be the most successful yet in playing productively with novel approaches to a performance space.

The program repeats through Sunday evening, and it's well worth making the time to attend at least once.



White Bird/Chris Roesing The boldly experimental "Two-Faced Bastard" beckons you to pay attention to the men behind the curtain.

Though there's no announcement of this, the company refers to the two sides as the "ether side" and the "forum side," according to White Bird's Paul King.

Those vertical blinds in between form a barrier, but it's a highly permeable one. Dancers frequently push through from one side to the other, opening temporary views across the divide as they do. Sometimes, too, the blinds are angled to allow a partial view through. And midway through the show, the performers stop and offer audience members the chance to switch from one side to the other.

But it isn't just vantage points that are put in opposition here. As Lucy Guerin, who co-created the piece with Chunky Move founder Gideon Obarzanek, puts it in a program note, "It is in essence a dialogue, exploring two points of view and separating out some ideas that would perhaps normally be integrated within one work."

Talk and action. Onstage and back-stage artistic identities. Love and anger. Adult authority and childlike play. All of these concepts face off, waltz apart, tumble together.

As the piece begins, a discussion is taking place on the forum side. "What do you want from an audience?" actor Brian Lipson asks the dancers. Meanwhile Stephanie Lake, who's been warming up by herself on the ether side, starts to dance, with a focus on fine, sharp, complex hand movements, like a hybrid of sign language and semaphore.

While Lake moves, scraps of dialogue drift over. "I often find myself wanting to disrupt the performance," a man says. "It's like a weird lust for chaos." A dancer slips to Lake's side and joins in unison movement. Then another, providing counterpoint. Then the movement speeds, builds energy and a nervous momentum that splits the difference between the twitchy and the mechanical.

The discussion grows philosophical: "What's important is what happens, not who's watching," a man says. But soon, the lust for chaos kicks in, and both those elements are in flux. What we see, what we presume, guess, want -- there's a subversive kind of manipulation going on in regard to all these things. There's no wonder a commentator in the company's hometown of Melbourne called it "the work of an evil genius."

Dancers are interviewed while they're in motion ("That little movement, does it refer to insect life?"). Little scenes are played out, such as one between a couple who spoon while seated at a dinette set:

They stand and execute some very coital-looking thrusts, only not with their hips but with the table, pushing it back and forth on the floor like a proxy for their own carnality. Then there's a hilariously inspired clash of dancers in makeshift cardboard-and-Styrofoam battle gear.

Most amazing of all is a solo by Antony Hamilton, who looks like a hyperactive little boy whose imagination is running wild through a land of robots and monsters and dragging his poor body along for the ride. Oh, and providing his own human-beatbox/cartoon voice-over sound effects as he goes.

But then, only half the room gets to see Hamilton's solo; the half that doubtless misses something else really cool. Better make the time to go twice.

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