

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Annie Wilson

Keening Humans and Instructions from Creatures

by Janna Meiring

Entering Theatre Exile's black box, a decision: Take a seat amongst scattered chairs across the stage, or on the risers. Be immersed or retain some distance. I choose the risers. *bilialien*, which features two works conceived and directed by Annie Wilson in the Fringe Festival, ruminates on the depth and color of the experience of humans and non-human creatures, and our choice to immerse or distance ourselves.

I hear a distant vocal, comprised of an ensemble never seen, in the first work, *Keening*. It is a strain to focus, as your eyes might try to decipher figures on the horizon. Against the only light source—a coil of string-lights—I see shadows shuffle around the periphery of the darkness. They spread out, crawl along the chairs and behind the risers. The subtle sounding develops into full-bodied wails. They sound individually, with call and response, and sometimes in a collective frenzy: rough breaths between a child's aching sobs; high-pitched cats in heat; a congested chest breaking free; whale songs through endless water; and whining puppies.

All of this, human.

I keep my eyes closed, even in this visual deprivation setting, to amplify the layers of singular voices in wailing collective grief. The silence at the end is shocking and brief. I wish for more time to absorb the depths, safely revealed in the darkness.

The second work, *Instructions*, is as laden visually as *Keening* is auditorily. A heavy black curtain exposes only a pink foot and a blue foot. Two voices speak into a mic, filling our imagination with images of insects/aliens/creatures/people. They speak of the exoskeleton, the arms and legs, the vulnerable bellies, the antennae. A door opens and dancer Anita Holland appears, a demanding presence, tall with bug eyes (giant sunglasses) and wings (peach handsewn coattails). She leans into the spotlight, parts her mouth as if about to speak, and lifts a lampshade out towards the audience.

From here, Christina Gesualdi, Laura Vriend and Mina Estrada begin to move amidst a shock of colors: respectively, a blue bodysuit with lumps like organs sewn into the legs, a puffy bright skirt and silverware from ears that jangle, and layers of green fabric with bright looping orange cords. They gyrate and shake, rotating around the space, and compose brief arrangements, such as the three swaying softly while Holland mimes a shout into the lampshade. Near the end, they speak simultaneously. I catch: "So will you too," "Wash off the radioactive sludge," "Splendor in the unknown," and "Let me exist with you, I need to breathe."

Mixing child-like chaos with satisfying gravity, *Instructions* is a microscopic view of the lives of creatures and their needs and demands.

[*billialien*](#), Annie Wilson, Theatre Exile, 2019 Fringe Festival, Sept. 6-10.

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