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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Jenna Spitz

A Leap Into Hybrid Performance

by Megan Bridge

Philadelphia has long been a hotbed for experimental, hybrid performance forms. Schools like Headlong Performance Institute and the Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training continue to contribute to the petri dish, incubating young performance makers who are trained in movement forms that fall well outside the traditional strictures of acting or dance technique classes. Makers who chafe at the potentially limiting term "dance," which, for many, is inextricably bound up with pointed toes, high kicks, and virtuosic posturing, have chosen other words to describe their work (physical theater, dance theater, devised theater, performance art…). There's a politics to all of this, though. If we jettison the term "dance" because it's been defined too narrowly in the past, we tighten the boundaries of an already marginalized field. We limit not just what dance *can* do, but what a dancing body *might* do.

Almanac Dance Circus Theatre, as is clear in this young company's name, positions itself as a hybrid of several forms. Their current project, *Leaps of Faith and Other Mistakes*, deploys acrobatics as a kind of "task-based choreography. Not the end in itself, but something that opens up new worlds of possibility for our consciousness and presence," explains Ben Grinberg, founding member of Almanac and one of four performers in the current production, which premieres at Fleisher Art Memorial on June 25-28.

Identifying as a "contemporary acrobatics company," Almanac is a perfect example of the companies that have emerged out of what, in the early 2000's, some thought of as a "Philadelphia school" of hybrid performance. In a 2002 CityPaper article, Debra Auspitz

identified three companies—New Paradise Laboratories, Headlong Dance Theater, and Pig Iron Theater Company—as trailblazers of a new path for performance work that was indigenous to Philadelphia. More than a decade later, we're still seeing the results of what's grown from that fertile ground.

Almanac's Grinberg revealed to me in an email exchange that, in his experience, "Devised theater and dance do ask fundamentally different things of their audiences.… Theater asks audiences to relate to or understand the experience of a character through a narrative.… Dance asks audiences to consider somewhat larger and more abstract questions, like what is the relationship of space to time? What is it to have a body? How can I inhabit it? What is the difference between a body and any other physical object? Any number of intellectual questions can be investigated through dance. Dance is kind of like freedom, in that way, for a theatre maker."

In *Leaps of Faith and Other Mistakes,* Almanac has used this freedom to construct a "75-minute theatrical work incorporating feats of balance, strength, and flexibility… an absurd and contemplative tapestry of sublime human idiocy, isolationist seafarer cults, and the kinds of people that devote their lives to becoming acrobats." The four performers in this work, Nicole Burgio, Nick Gillette, Ben Grinberg, and Adam Kerbel, are, in fact, the very kinds of people that devote their lives to becoming acrobats. At the in-progress showing of *Leaps of Faith* that I saw in May, it was clear from the work's opening moments that these bodies are highly intelligent and highly trained. By climbing and leaping on each other, the performers repeatedly construct complicated architectural forms, their perched bodies often soaring high above the stage. The work is polished and tight, but not slick; the effort is not hidden. With each slight adjustment of foot position made to achieve the optimal balance point, with each shiver of muscle exertion, I not only notice but savor the actual "work" put into the work. And then there's the text. Written by Josh McIlvain, there is an element of real-time discovery and humor in the way the story, sometimes absurd, sometimes poetic, sometimes mundane, dances between fantastical and autobiographical.

Hybrid, interdisciplinary, dance, theater. It's all of it. Grinberg hopes "that seeing dance next to an acrobatic 'trick' next to a scene played out opens up space for audience interpretation at the same time that it keeps the whole moving forward." Go see this work. It moves, and it might well move you.

Leaps of Faith and Other Mistakes, June 25 – 28, Fleisher Art Memorial. Tickets ($12-$25) online at almanac.brownpapertickets.com or at the door.

By Megan Bridge
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