

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

'Cinderbox 18' crackles with energy

Exploration of dance process is wholly entertaining

November 17, 2007

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In "Cinderbox18," now in its world premiere at the Museum of Contemporary Art Theatre, choreographer Julia Rhoads and the highly individualistic members of her troupe, Lucky Plush Productions, have created a visually, kinetically, sonically and intellectually dazzling piece of dance theater that comments brilliantly on the whole process of creating, rehearsing, performing, viewing and critiquing dance.

A deceptively difficult work that the eight members of Lucky Plush carry off as if it were the most easeful of long-form improvisations, the piece has a bit of Pirandello-like absurdism about it, as well as plenty of post-modern self-consciousness that has been neatly twisted into the most charming, self-mocking bits of playful humor. "Cinderbox18" also contains just enough pure dance pyrotechnics to make audiences with a limited tolerance for pedestrian movement sit up and take notice of the dancers' subtly underplayed technical skills. Overall, it's a work you wish Mikhail Baryshnikov could see (ideally performed live), because he might well be tempted to take on Rhoads and her dancers for a residency at his experimental dance center in New York.

A richly theatrical piece -- with very deftly performed spoken riffs inserted into an overall performance that could only be carried off by accomplished dancers -- this work is at once intimate, public and voyeuristic.



Enter the theater and from the start the setup is different. In each of the stage's four corners sit a pair of dancers in casual jersey workout clothes, carrying on low-key but animated conversations with each other. It might be a rehearsal studio where the dancers are on break, or where some are being used and some are just observing or warming up. Eventually they assemble into something approaching the formal structure of choreography, but the little gestures performers never do once they arrive onstage (scratching a leg, rubbing an eye, audibly sniffing or bending a stiff knee) suggests they are engaged in a work-in-progress.

The essential "piece" stops and starts. There is much talk of *deja vu* as various sequences are seen on video or as if being performed in an alternative universe. The dancers reveal quirky little stories from what seems like real life. And from time to time real-life tensions between partners flare (or is this just a performance?). An extended riff on upscale bottled water and the island of Fiji are part of the zaniness.

Moments of art and reality collide seamlessly and sneakily, movement sequences fracture and become reassembled. And the result is invariably a great deal more than a cerebral exercise; it is enormous, attention-sustaining fun.

The splendid dancer-actors include Julia Wollrab (formerly of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago), Meghann Rose Wilkinson, Jennifer Meek, Elizabeth Lentz, Lia Bonfilio, Marc Macaranas, Benjamin Law and Zachary Whittenburg. The inventive score by David Pavkovic is lyrically electronic with moments of Asian influence. Veteran video designer John Boesche has devised some marvelous and varied visual effects, with top-notch lighting by Kevin Rechner.

I'm not sure what Rhoads had in mind when she titled her 75-minute work. But "Cinderbox18" is no container of ashes; it is full of sparks.