



## LUCKY PLUSH PRODUCTIONS "16 Artists, Thirsty Well"

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By **Laura Molzahn**

At their best, the pieces on this program are chaotic, funny, and very much alive, still carrying a whiff of the studio hothouses that produced them. Curated by Lucky Plush, "16 Artists, Thirsty Well" showcases five works by four choreographers (and one theater director) in their prime. Last night the crowd at the Hamlin Park field house overflowed, leaving some people to perch on stools or the floor. Friday night, the last show of this short run, is sold out. (But you can check on "carpet square" seating by e-mailing [Julia@luckyplush.com](mailto:Julia@luckyplush.com).)

Collaboration --- nothing new, of course --- rules here. Lucky Plush's "The Better Half," choreographed by Julia Rhoads and directed by 500 Clown's Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, really feels like people are making things up as they go along. And they might be: the program credits some text to the ensemble, noting that "they just say stuff." Hilarious stuff. The "trailer version" of a full-length work scheduled at the MCA next fall, this piece made me feel like a fly on the wall of the studio. And I mean that in the best possible way. Last on the bill, it was the most riotous of the bunch.



Though they've only recently started working together, Danzig and Rhoads are a natural match: both favor the meta-theatrical. Their premise in "The Better Half" is that we're watching a theater audition or rehearsal, with Tim Heck the stage manager/director -- who morphs into a detective when the play veers into murder mystery. Rhoads is the wife and Adrian Danzig the husband in a crumbling marriage; Meghann Wilkinson a "stout, subservient woman of 50," as Heck describes her; and Kim Goldman a "cheeky" 19-year-old servant. The apparently improvised play intertwines with backstage comedy to plant the seeds of a rowdy, witty dance-theater piece.

The show opens with "Traitor," a 2009 duet created and performed --- somewhat differently each time --- by Lisa Gonzales and Darrell Jones, who seem constantly connected no matter how far apart they might be. It begins with Jones running backward in a big circle around Gonzales while she stands still, though her head and torso rotate as if tracking his moves. Rambling, rolling, and crawling all over the stage, they talk a lot, sometimes in set texts but more often in seemingly off-the-cuff, very funny commentary on what they're doing: "I love this part," "This will hurt!" The floor keeps giving way beneath them emotionally. But it doesn't seem to matter. They're like kids at a sleep-over, playing so hard they exhaust themselves, completely lost in their world of imagination and recollection.

Peter Carpenter's premiere, "Ritual of Abundance for Lean Times #2: Beyond What Is Possible," which tackles intensely serious subjects in a serious way, isn't well served by its placement after the rambunctious "Traitor." Part of a cycle, it would also undoubtedly benefit from additional context. Carpenter's adaptation of writings by Presbyterian pastor Joy Douglas Strome plus some of his own texts, created in collaboration with performers Lia Bonfilio and Wilkinson, are expertly snipped apart and repeated to reveal their meaning. "Ritual of Abundance" does come to seem a ritual, and a moving one, mourning 21 youths killed on Chicago's streets. But Carpenter appears ambivalent about how potent his ritual might be, which makes the piece uncomfortably tentative.

Jones's "HooHa" is strange, mysterious, and touching in ways I'm not sure I can track. Set to an ambient recording of last year's "Respect March Madness Part 2" voguing ball on Chicago's south side, this trio for African-American men - Jones, Damon Greene, and J'Sun Howard - at first re-creates the atmosphere of a club. Then it takes a left turn into a quiet duet for Jones and Howard. The feeling is reverential, even when they slowly, deliberately take turns slapping each other's faces, producing a delicate melody.

Gonzales's work in progress, "The Study of Last Things," seems far more traditional than the other pieces. Dancers Maggie Bennett, Carly Czach, and Dale O'Reilly perform it as if walking on eggshells. Though this dance is said to be about "the aftermath of an irrevocable decision," I couldn't necessarily see that. Like Carpenter's piece, this one may have suffered from the surrounding matrix of often humorous, freewheeling work.

You can expect a bit of potluck, of awkward juxtapositions and transitions, on a mixed bill. This program is fascinating, though, for its peek at the process and promise of better, fuller things to come.