

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Hiel Reinout

Something From Nothing: Eleanor Bauer at Christ Church Neighborhood House Theater

by R. Eric Thomas

There is
a bead
of sweat

creeping down
Eleanor Bauer's calf.

It glistens and catches the eye for just a moment.
It meanders, shimmers flirtatiously and disappears into her solidly grounded foot.

In a blip of distraction, a bubble of superficial fascination fizzles to the surface of my mind. Bauer is standing on the second rung of a ladder, belting out Patsy Cline's "Crazy" in a hearty alto. She has transformed a polar bear costume, wearing it wrapped around her shoulders and torso like a furry egg, leaving her legs exposed. I zoom in on her body, its parts, the surface of her skin, the sweat, the precision of the effort. For just a moment. And perhaps that's as it should be.

Bauer, a highly accomplished dancer/choreographer, presented (*BIG GIRLS DO BIG THINGS*) on January 19 and 20 at Christ Church Neighborhood House Theater as part of thirdbird's Seen & Heard performance series. A carefully calibrated explosion of grandiosity, Bauer's solo is a study of opposing forces in collaboration. Clumsy lumbering meets gentle precision; insecurity and attention-seeking go hand-in-hand; bigness and smallness, loudness and softness, all percolate through this fascinating work.

At the start of the piece, the statuesque Bauer enters the space unassumingly and melts into the polar bear costume, splayed out in a shock of white on the black floor. Zipping herself inside, Bauer writhes, wriggles and stretches, transforming the bear into other strange beasts. Any aficionado of the television show "Lost" is primed to see polar bears as harbingers of the perilous, mysterious and inscrutable. This polar bear does not disappoint. The animal explores the space, growing in stature and presence even as the over-sized costume threatens to trip the dancer secreted inside. After the bear claps and clangs a pair of cymbals—a riff on dancing bears literal and metaphorical—it performs a series of tentative but preening poses.

At the performance I attended, a man in the front row was filming on his phone. Bauer stopped mid-pose, unzipped the face of the bear and asked him to desist. This unscripted moment was quickly erased as she merged into the bear's fascinating discovery of sound and the possibilities of amplification. The revelation of the performer in that instant, however, is interesting to dwell on for just a moment. Clearly, Bauer was right to protect the dissemination of her image and work from the illicit videographer. But, because so much of (*BIG GIRLS DO BIG THINGS*) is about the tender, fragile process of making work and thrusting it into the stark, blank world, this moment of response to copyright infringement took on more complex shading.

As the performance progressed, my mind kept flashing back to the moment we saw Bauer's face prematurely peaking out of the costume. In her brief spoken request—perhaps, "look, don't take"—the gap between performer and performance shrank startlingly. The act of stepping on stage is itself a demand, infused with the confidence that what one is about to do is important, is worthy, is big enough. Seeing Bauer within the costume, speaking plainly without artifice, reminded me that the presentation of art is also about smallness, about earnest requests.

Later in (*BIG GIRLS DO BIG THINGS*), Bauer sheds the polar bear skin, wrapping it around herself like a cape and begins to experiment with it as a costume rather than a disguise. She swaggers to the back of the space with the bear slung low around her waist like a pair of thuggish jeans and then seamlessly transforms the machismo into the preening hop of a duckwalk. Slinging the bear over her shoulder, the vogueing approximation of femininity again transforms, into the petulant stomp of a runway model. The focus shifts from exploration of space and volume to the limits of performance: the piece becomes more finely tuned and dangerous.

The piece reaches its zenith as Bauer, clad in white heels, her torso ensconced in fur, sings “Crazy” as she climbs a ladder. She sings through it once standing on the ground: “I’m crazy for trying and I’m crazy for crying. I’m crazy for loving you!” Reaching the end, she steps up one rung and raises her pitch note by note. Every part of her body screams with insecurity and purpose; her leg muscles twitch as they strain to maintain balance. She climbs, higher, raising her voice with each step. She is deliberate; the song is not rushed and as she rises she gains conviction and releases a bottled manic energy. At the top of the ladder and her register, her voice becomes reedy and thin but the act has reached a largeness in daring, dedication and effort.

And so
the sweat:

In *(BIG GIRLS DO BIG THINGS)*, one sees the strain of creation firsthand captured in small moments, existing simultaneously beneath and beside the “look at me” braggadocio the artist must assume. We watch as a lumbering polar bear becomes graceful and gentle and, in so doing, reflects the struggle of every creature that seeks to fill an empty space with something it has created.

(BIG GIRLS DO BIG THINGS), Eleanor Bauer, Christ Church Neighborhood House, January 19 and 20. No further performances.

By R. Eric Thomas

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