

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: Richard Termine Photography

Fever Dreams

by P. Graham

Expect blood, bones and a view of the body both raw and poetic.

The Body Lautrec – using puppets and an amazing cast of actors – renders the life of artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec with sensitivity and passion. Co-creators Mary Tuomanen and Aaron Cromie temper Lautrec's debauched Belle Epoque world, filled by his own endless physical pain, with a delicate intimacy among the characters. Tuomanen and Cromie work in collaboration with the Mutter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and their portrayal of the medical realities of life in the late 1800's is suitably frightening for the damaged Lautrec and diseased streetwalkers.

Composer, pianist and performer Heath Allen makes the suffering bearable with his music. The first time we see Lautrec walk his crooked walk, Allen supplies an off-kilter accompaniment. In a defiant café song one of the prostitutes jubilantly tells the crowd they're all assholes, taking a moment to declare the kindness of Lautrec, then coming in with a show stopping final verse. Even Lautrec has a moment of musical joy, dueting on the piano with Allen until the mood is abruptly severed by yet another fearful apparition.

As Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Cromie is seamlessly believable and the other actors (Kate Raines, Christie Parker, Kittson O'Neill, Malgorzata Kasprzycka) are all spellbinding performers. In one moment of transcendence, as we hear a wrenching confession from one of the women, Cromie, Allen and the two other women listen in still attention. One of the women kneels on the floor in gray skirts and the other stands in ballet girl attire, in what could be a tableau from one of Lautrecs' paintings.

Well known figures from Lautrec's work are woven into this world. We become intimately acquainted with his prostitute companions in ribaldry and suffering, each of them complex and differentiated as characters. Lautrec plays a cleverly orchestrated drinking game with one that incorporates a cabinet of drawers as a third partner. He sketches them, serving as archivist for their world and bearing witness

to their stories. The medical profession is embodied by a larger than life puppet figure in top hat and a disembodied voice that explains the need to care for the the health of prostitutes. That “care” is portrayed in a horrendous surgical procedure complete with bodily fluids and a chilling description of the third stage of syphilis, describing the woman who believes she is disease free, all the while “plying her trade.” She confronts us with her gaze during this description, making horror visible with the simplest of means.

The Body Lautrec, Aaron Cromie and Mary Tuomanen, Caplan Studio Theatre, UArts, September 12-21. <http://fringearts.com/event/the-body-lautrec-8/>

By Patricia Graham
September 16, 2014