

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ian Douglas

Barking at Your Battles

by Whitney Weinstein

As a young adult zooming into full-blown adulthood, I'm beginning to experience a tremendous sense of nostalgia. I remember the unbearable anticipation of adventures as I moved away from home. I think further back to when my most important concern was which bathing suit I'd wear to the pool. I grow calm recalling the hugeness of my grandfather's arms as he engulfed me at age six, making me feel safe. I miss feeling invincible as my life increasingly revolves around financial responsibilities and a ten-year plan.

Pilobolus Dance Theater's *Shadowland* is a tale of a teenage girl on the brink of outgrowing childhood, enthralled by the excitement of independence, exhilaration, and love. Thrown into an alternative dimension where characters are silhouetted against a projection screen, *Shadowland* is a live cartoon, daring my eyes to make sense of the fluctuation between 2-D contours and 3-D action as dancers move both in front of and behind a portable screen. The audience follows the teen identified as Dog Girl through an array of coming-of-age heartaches and triumphs.

If you've heard anything about Pilobolus Dance Theater it's that they are masters of the body, demonstrating feats of unimaginable strength and contortion. (If you haven't heard anything about Pilobolus, check out these previous tD reviews from [2013](#) and [2015](#). You may also recognize their Hyundai commercial from [2007](#).) Premiering in Madrid in 2009, *Shadowland* has been shared with audiences over 1,000 times and in more than 30 countries. They have a keen eye for detail. When a gust of wind blows, so does the skirt and hair of our heroine. When Dog Girl turns her head, her profile, floppy ears included, adjusts to the perspective. These minute technicalities allow me to authentically submerge into a plausible reality.

The cast manipulates lighting and sound to transform two dancers into a massive dragon that intimidates Dog Girl. Dancers folded at the waist create playful squids bouncing back and forth. Fingertips inch a tiny crab across the stage and whole bodies merge to blink the long eyelashes of a larger-than-life face.

Members of Pilobolus pride themselves on the development of what they identify as “shadow work.” During an audience talkback, dancer Heather Jeane Favretto explained that the company pioneered a technique of shadow-theater that couples light and body shaping to manifest a “shadow-verse.” Member Sayer Mansfield described *Shadowland* as “more than dancing,” with over 250 props and a live light board that was controlled exclusively on stage by the dancers. The performers travel, constantly prepared to transport equipment and props into unfamiliar spaces. As “masters of shadow,” Mansfield explained, they are constantly creating a new language. Dancers even put on their clothes astonishingly. The opening scene displays costumes on clothing display stands. Dancers take the dress and suit off the racks to literally somersault into them.

Dog Girl begins the night posing in front of a mirror, rebelling with a pretend cigarette in hand. When she notices her parents watching, she grows embarrassed, leaping into a bed—composed of dancers’ bodies—to secretly snuggle a stuffed animal. Eventually the shadows on her wall take life, scooping her into a dreamworld where shadow, sound, and size deceive perception. *Shadowland* is the shadows that dance on your wall at night, both comforting and terrifying.

In a car ride with a cowboy, Dog Girl smokes her first *real* cigarette. With a centaur who shares her feelings of isolation from normalcy, Dog Girl finds lust and love. *Shadowland* is an erotic display of human connection. When seductive circus members force her into performing tricks for their own profit, Dog Girl feels the cruelty of exploitation for the benefit of others. I remember as a child wanting to grow up, always looking forward to the next phase of maturation, only to discover the world’s opposition towards our uniquenesses. In retrospect, innocence provides a sanctuary.

A large hand reappears throughout, reaching down with omnipotent influence. It is this hand that crumples and reforms the child into a Dog Girl. It is this hand that points, taps, and nudges her. Dog Girl is angry, she is curious, she is elated. In the end, it is this massive hand that constantly prods her into discomfort and danger. These situations become opportunities to grow, as Dog Girl learns to confront her monsters independently and accept the support of the hand to repeatedly ascend. *Shadowland* explores growing into an inevitable sense of self. Dog Girl learns to let go of the matters beyond her control, events placed before her without choice. Just as important, she learns to hold on to her core values and morals, relying on her newly recognized inner strengths to carry her through life’s strifes.

Shadowland, Pilobolus Dance Theater, Zellerbach Theatre, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, April 6-8,
<https://www.annenbergcenter.org/event/pilobolus-dance-theater>

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June 12, 2017