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## Dancers mix humor and the horrifying A bizarre expression of social power plays

By TOM STRINI, **Journal Sentinel dance critic**

A provocative brew of cruelty and comedy boiled in two new dances by Aviva Geismar Saturday evening at Danceworks.

Geismar is a New Yorker finishing up her master's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her Drastic Action company, comprising Emily Bunning, Alessandra Larson, Sarah Lewis and Gina Paolillo, came to town for the occasion. They will repeat this program at 2 p.m. today.

The four dancers rose to Geismar's every outrageous demand with a mad brio that gave the bizarre material an extra charge. Crashing into the floor was the least of it. In "All Fall Down," for example, the prone Lewis has her head cradled and turned by her colleague's bare feet, and Larson has her lips pulled open grotesquely by Bunning and Paolillo.

Such antics, at once horrifying and absurdly funny, fit into a dense theater piece about cliques and power relations within them.

"All Fall Down" begins with a tense, counterbalanced standoff, with all four women clustered shoulder to shoulder and pushing hard, their determined faces inches apart. This struggle builds to a climax in which the women finally and suddenly break apart. They take up a series of effortful, angular solo phrases in a sort of rock-paper-scissors competition. Lewis, cheerleader-pretty in her ponytail, flops to the floor in despair and defeat, and the competition turns from free-for-all to three-on-one. The others dance about and upon her in thumping lockstep, until dissension rises in the ranks. Lewis seizes the opening and unseats Larson, who is made to suffer her oral humiliation.

It's awful, awful, I tell you. And yet, we laughed, first because we're used to it - most comedy is cruel, at some level. Second, Geismar's dead-on understanding of social realities is like a poke in the ribs. (Ouch! Ha! That tickles!) Third, a sly, expert brand of mugging is just pointed enough to tip the punch lines. Lewis is especially good at this; you can see getting hurt to getting mad to getting even cross her face like a cold front on a TV weather map. And to think we felt sorry for her.

If you've ever dealt with a child's night terrors, you'll recognize the opening and closing imagery in "There's Many a Slip." At the start, the lanky Bunning struggles to move and to force out a sentence ("Wait! I, I have something to . . . something to tell you!") as the other three hold her aloft and alternately seem to comfort and unduly restrain her. In a similar episode in the end, Larson is the dreamer and Bunning and Lewis are attendants who just might be part of her nightmare. As Larson tries to cry out, her colleagues sometimes place a hand over her mouth to suppress her.

The disorienting surrealism and the flesh-and-bone physicality of the choreography make this dance riveting. The nutty comedy of an intervening solo by Paolillo makes it bearable. Even then, Paolillo dances to drop-dead, panting exhaustion. In life and in Geismar's dances, tragedy and comedy can be hard to sort out.