

A collection of kitsch, dystopia and decadence

DANCE REVIEW

fFIDA International Dance Festival

Mainstage Series: Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto

BY MICHAEL CHARR

Experience is one thing. Profiting from it another.

As Toronto's annual summer-time dance extravaganza, fFida, moves toward its close this weekend, the festival's epicentre has shifted from the Winchester Street Theatre and the Distillery Historic District to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. There, ostensibly, audiences are offered the comforting assurance that the eight different programs on offer under the banner "Mainstage One" will feature the work of choreographers with at least 10 years of professional experience. This year, this added experience comes at a premium price of \$15 per three-choreographer show.

Sadly, however, at least on the basis of Monday's three opening Mainstage One programs, neither top tier pricing nor the theoretical decade's worth of choreographic experience can be counted on as guarantees of quality.

Take for example *Winter Thunder* from fFida's artistic director, Michael Menegon, who modestly programmed his new work to open Series A. One could argue interminably about whether Menegon's fitful, rod-bearing progress across the stage punctuated with incomprehensible hand gestures could usefully be described as dance. The real point is that *Winter Thunder* was obscure in content and unconvincingly performed.

One assumes that Menegon's floor-mop wig and eyeglasses were intended to suggest Einstein - which would make some sense of the soundscore

Series B is illuminated by another compelling duet, *I Walk a Yellow Dress*, choreographed by Jessica Runge for herself and Barbara Pallomina. Regardless of years of choreographic experience, Runge is simply one of those performers who has the ability to compel audiences to watch her. Pallomina is no slouch either. Together they etched a delicately negotiated relationship of tender support and understanding.

Female choreographer/performers dominate fFida and along with them, understandably, subject matter that appeals to the female imagination and psyche. In her excerpted *Encendillas del Alma Pura*, Montrealese Mariko Tanabe offered a danced vision of the ethnic and religious accommodation that allowed Jews, Muslims and Christians to live together in medieval Spain. Also in Series B, Australia's Rakini Devi danced evocatively to her own recounting of her Burmese mother's terrible flight from the Second World War Japanese invaders to freedom in India.

Series C features Toronto flamenco dancer Hali Dale, stomping her heels and creating serpentine motions of the arms and hands, sometimes to the live guitar accompaniment of Marija Temo's guitar and in apparent tribute to the cultural resilience of Spanish gypsies and Native American people.

New Yorker Aviva Geismar, another riveting performer, danced part of a madcap solo about a woman torn apart by inner forces. Before that Geismar teamed with Emily Bunning in a splendid duet about attraction, repulsion and co-dependence, all communicated vividly through dance.

And then there is Cindy Lin and her Toronto-based troupe. What can one say? Lin's view of Middle Eastern dance verges on ethnic stereotyping. By the time three of her young ladies appeared in Egyptian headdresses, my blushing on their behalf compelled me to flee the theater in favour of the cooling drizzle outside. Kitsch



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