This appealing but odd work at the Southern Theater attempts to show that truth is something that blooms in our minds.

By CAROLINE PALMER, Special to the Star Tribune

There's a parable in which several blind men touch different parts of an elephant and then offer opinions about the animal's actual appearance. Of course, each man can only offer a limited perspective, proving how difficult it is to understand the whole when our knowledge is based on the parts.

It's not certain whether Los Angeles-based choreographer Lionel Popkin referenced this story when choreographing "There Is An Elephant In This Dance" but the appealingly odd 2009 work, performed at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis on Friday night, reveals an artist determined to discover a certain truth by gathering all the possibilities filtered through his personal history.

There are at least three elephants to consider in this dance: the literal (represented by a plush costume), the figurative (something apparent yet not confronted) and the divine (the deity Ganesh was prominent in Popkin's upbringing with a Hindu mother and Jewish father). The work opens with local dancer Morgan Thorson donning the different costume pieces to perform a series of whimsical movements, affirming the notion of elephants as benevolent creatures.

But we eventually see Thorson, as well as Popkin, wearing only the head, arms or feet, which transforms how we view their bodies. The choreography reveals this transitional state between identities, and it's not always comfortable. Thorson jitters with childlike impatience until her gray sleeves fall off and Popkin spins the bulbous head to face backward.

Popkin's solos are particularly notable. A former dancer with Trisha Brown, he has a style incorporating his broad facial expressions and sturdy sense of flow. And there are eccentric yet engaging moments such as Ishmael Houston-Jones appearing from the shadows to lick his hand or perform a sped-up Bharatanatyam-like dance. Carolyn Hall's desire to put her finger in Popkin's mouth represents a persistent memory. She moves lightly but also becomes a burden while draped across Popkin's shoulders. Robert Een's musical composition is a gorgeous blend of vocals and cello, and a film of Popkin as the bopping pachyderm provides a peaceful visual accompaniment.

We may not experience the whole elephant in this work. That is the point. Popkin eloquently demonstrates that the truth is something of our creation, informed by who we are and who we will become.