“Inflatable Trio”
Lionel Popkin
Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, California, February 23-25, 2017

Waterbeds may have been a 70’s fad, but what about inflatable furniture? For a mere $74.95 (with free shipping, who knew?), Amazon offers the sofa of your dreams, one designed with a “waterproof-flocked top surface and a vinyl bottom that provides an incredibly comfortable sitting surface for any occasion.” For Lionel Popkin, a former Trisha Brown dancer and a choreographer who has mined his Hindu/Jewish roots, memorialized Ruth St. Denis and sautéed onions and curried zucchini in a range of works that satisfied, amused and, if not necessarily provoked, left indelible imagery nonetheless.

In his latest premiere, Los Angeles-based Popkin, Carolyn Hall (she’s danced with him for some three decades), and Samantha Mohr have a blast with blow-up furniture, specifically a contoured mega-lounger, matching ottoman and, yes, a settee, all lemon yellow in color and also transparent. Of course, without an electric air pump (which alternately sounded like a vacuum cleaner or leaf blower)—and the performers own exhalations, of which there were many—the props would fall flat.

Happily, the work did not, although as part of the scenario, the sometimes empty-of-air furnishings also served the dancers well. Set to a score by Tom Lopez, the everyday sounds included a whistling tea kettle, water splashing and a trumpet-heavy mariachi band (this is Southern California, after all), with the 55-minute dance providing a look into domesticity gone awry, where the deflating and dismantling of both the props and the social order were challenged, reconfigured and re-imagined.

Indeed, intermittent aural static helped amplify moments of chaos, while there were faux tango duets (barefoot ochos can be good for your podiatric health), and sublime trios with the performers moving sensually as a unified whole, especially towards the work’s end, when their arms were wrapped, octopus-like, around one another’s shoulders, an especially poignant tableau.

It wasn’t exactly a ménage à trois, but more like a menagerie à trois, the dancers exemplifying and embodying their own kind of wildlife park. In other words: This contemporary movement piece
allowed the viewer to create a personal story while at the same time live vicariously through these skilled performers. Mohr was grace, grit and gazelle-like in her leaps; Hall, hurling herself onto the sofa, looked like a lion attacking its prey, her expansive lunges and arm movements a delight; and Popkin, able to support Mohr in an extended riff during which time she hung by her knees that enveloped his shoulders, was the de facto ringmaster.

When the music veered into merry-go-round territory, there was also a sinister twinge reminiscent of Hitchcock’s “Shadow of a Doubt.” After all, this terpsichorean triumvirate, while appearing, more often than not, playful and near nonchalant, could also have been a bevy of mad housewives/househusband, armed for bear. Popkin, climbing atop the sofa and balancing precariously, looked fierce before falling, as did the women, who also balanced, bent and bobbed on, amid and around the blow-up décor.

There was also an array of jumping, spinning and the conforming of bodies to the pliable furnishings, where dancers were hidden and covert, waiting to spring. Is this, one wonders, what domestic partners do when nobody’s looking?

Why not, as Maria Garcia’s costumes proved as quirky as the concept: Mohr wore a plastic, see-through rain coat, shedding it to reveal a body-hugging brown knit dress; Hall slunk around in a sleeveless crushed blue velvet jumpsuit and Popkin sported an argyle vest, maroon red pants and top. Until, that is, they all rocked boxer shorts and argyle sweaters, locking and popping in unison to a neo-waltz.

The space, long and narrow with bad sight lines was, however, constraining. (The Skirball, designed by Moshe Safdie, is architecturally interesting, but the makeshift theater is not, making site-specific dances, which used to be routine, a far better fit.) It did prove adequate, however, for tossing around the deflated furniture to the sounds of an orchestra tuning up, with Mohr kicking the ottoman before heaving it like ace pitcher Nolan Ryan. The seemingly more deranged member of the group, Mohr also managed to do a very convincing crabwalk.

Chris Kuhl’s lighting scheme was simple, and, while the program credited the estimable Cari Ann Shim Sham with video design, the work featured only a few minutes’ worth of projected imagery. In addition to the neo-tango as recurring motif, reciprocal kissing and air-blowing also punctuated the opus.
It's been a number of years since Popkin performed with Brown, but his articulated gestures and quirky pedestrian sensibility permeated “Inflatable.” And while this work is not, pardon the pun, overblown in the egotistical sense, neither is this dance dramedy a particularly penetrating study of insular home life. Of course, it's probably not meant to be—and that is, perhaps, the point.

Thanks, then, Mr. Popkin, for providing an escape hatch from the veritable mundane and a look into the minds—and bodies—of a dedicated threesome that danced their hearts out, which is sometimes precisely what is needed.

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Victoria Looseleaf is an award-winning international arts journalist who covers music and dance festivals around the world. Among the publications she has contributed to are the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, Dance Magazine and KCET's Artbound. In addition, she taught dance history at the University of Southern California, Cal State L.A., and at Santa Monica College. Her new book, “Isn't It Rich? A Novella In Verse,” is now available in paperback and on Kindle from Amazon.