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Young/Thomas' dance rich in complexity, volatility

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Two men hang with their feet and hands manacled to a sinister-looking pulley system. They twist and writhe, locked together in patterns of reciprocal movement: One plunging to the floor causes the other to be hoisted up in what looks like positions of extreme duress. The raw images of torture, or of marionettes being manipulated by an ominous puppet master, open out into larger questions of who is active, who is passive and how this state of mutual dependence will play out.

Throughout a powerful and thought-provoking concert by New York-based choreographers Bill Young and Colleen Thomas, we experience dance that is gorgeous, gut-grabbing and unpredictable - a potent metaphor for our volatile world. The eight dancers in "Rein, Bellow" are constantly trying to get a leg up on life's shifting planes, to find some comfort, security and personal identity in a universe governed by violent and unpredictable forces. The richly textured sound score by Philip Hamilton often evokes Middle Eastern music, and diaphanous curtains suggesting veils add their own element of mystery to a dance where ambiguity abounds as layers of meaning accumulate.

Sometimes simple maneuvers like women manipulating men's passive bodies evolve into the fluid anarchy of dancers twisting and tumbling together like a pulsating organism, or a violently manipulated trestle table becomes an unstable surface on which dancers slide and tumble.

In one section, two women in aerial harnesses alternate between struggling against the restraint the contraptions impose and giving into the sweeping momentum their support facilitates. In another, Mei-Kuang Chen and Pedro Osorio carry on a hilarious dialogue, she in Chinese and he in Spanish, as they connect in a series of playfully ambiguous gestures and embraces. Are they in love? Confused? Not that into each other?

Young's "For Want (A circus)," designed for the Southern Theater's funky space, has the dancers literally climbing and bouncing off of the walls. The wonderfully personable performers zip through hyperbolic gestures like cartoon characters or agile kids with attention deficit disorder. They wrestle, hassle, bully and show off to one another in a series of fragmented activities that often mutate into something else: At one point, Thomas saunters sadistically over the backs of several prone men to the "Habanera" from "Carmen." But gradually their bodies become an undulating current on which she rides with tender lyricism.

Dances, unlike other works of art, are created directly on the bodies of dancers. Thomas and Young pay tribute in the program to the choreographic contributions of their splendid company, which includes Heather McArdle and Joseph Poulson.

IF YOU GO

What: Bill Young/Colleen Thomas & Co.

When: 7 p.m. today

Where: Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Ave. S., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$18. 612-340-1725 or www.southerntheater.org

Capsule: Gorgeous and gut-grabbing dance delineates a complex world.