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DANCE / REVIEWS

Dance review: *What Doesn't Work* sets an allegory of striving and failure on the brute fact of the body

Posted by **Brian Howe** on Wed, Jan 6, 2016 at 1:03 PM

What Doesn't Work

★★★★

The Carrack Modern Art, Dec. 19, 2015

Often I go to see dance to lose myself in a beautiful or terrifying (ideally, both) fantasy world where sets, costumes and music are at least as prominent as movement. The dancers can shrink to mere moving parts in an intricate mechanism. But I was excited to go to the Carrack the weekend before Christmas because I knew I was going to see something else entirely—something raw, corporeal and purifying, all seething disgust and primitive slapstick.

No one **who has followed the performances of Culture Mill** directors Tommy Noonan and Murielle Elizéon would be surprised that *What Doesn't Work*, which they developed and performed with Berlin's Anja Müller, was a violent yet dazedly tender physical display that stripped away all ornaments to essentialize human motion, contact and conflict. The performance was a comprehensive catalog of ways to misuse the body—a frantic irrational exploration of physical and emotional capacity.

What Doesn't Work clearly carries on the aesthetic seen in *Brother Brother*, Noonan's duet with Clint Lutes, which **came to the Carrack around this time last year**. Both pieces began with silent staring and then erupted in a frenzy of motion. And both turned the roughshod white box of the Carrack, which had no art on its walls because of the holidays, into a hermetic void where creatures dripping with primordial soup engaged in awkward combat, flailing solidarity and some really poor communication.

But unlike *Brother Brother*, which sometimes used music to buffer its stripped-down intensity, the only soundtrack for *What Doesn't Work* was the stomps, pants, primitive groans and ugly bleats issuing from three tangling, clashing, running and tumbling dancers. They utilized the whole space, including the walls and whited-out windows, though "utilize" might be the wrong word for their scrabbling attempts to escape.

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photo by M. Korbel
Murielle Elizéon, Anja Müller and Tommy Noonan performing *What Doesn't Work*

What Doesn't Work was developed in response to a claustrophobic Berlin performance scene; it came to Durham through Müller's artist residency at Culture Mill (she also performed her solo piece, *La Mula*, the night before) as a part of the **Durham Independent Dance Artists** season. The piece has vestiges of a story—one critical of the social rites of trendy performance art circles—in its anarchic chaos. Once, Müller ironically applauded a leg lift by Noonan, who then reached up through his own shirt in a way that somehow telegraphed shame. But for the most part, the work demonstrated nothing but bodily dialogue and sloppy humanity, with no story but what you chose to bring to it.

Mostly, it's just fascinating to watch bodies and space used and pushed in unusual ways. With its ample room for spontaneity, the piece also had a thrill of danger. "Ideas come," Noonan seemed to murmur at the end of a solo, and the group took advantage the ideas that presented themselves. At one point, Noonan cracked a window to let in a chance squall of horns from the street. At another, the group muttered *gesundheit* to an audience member who sneezed, which appeared to cause Müller to burst into tears.

I always enjoy Noonan and Elizéon's work because there is no certain code to crack, no constructed context to separate you from the essence of the movement. Their pieces are lightning fields for pure perception and emotional response. They are vivid, full of stuff, but endlessly open. They prove, time and again, that despite the allure of beautifully embroidered fantasies, the body itself is more than enough.

Tags: Dance review, The Carrack Modern Art, Tommy Noonan, Murielle Elizéon, Anja Müller, Culture Mill, DIDA, Durham Independent Dance Artists, What Doesn't Work, Image

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