

Review: Lucky Plush gets its mojo back with ‘Rink Life’ and a disco ode to roller skating



By LAUREN WARNECKE

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Kara Brody and company in "Rink Life" by Lucky Plush Productions, part of the LookOut Steppenwolf performance series. (Topher Alexander photo)

Two years in the making, the premiere of a fully-finished version of “Rink Life” is finally here, Lucky Plush Productions’ ode to skating rink culture and communities formed by happenstance.

“Rink Life” runs through Nov. 17 as part of Steppenwolf Theatre’s LookOut Series in the 1700 Theatre.

For the last decade or so, this company has homed in on a particular approach to interdisciplinary dance theater that is equal parts dance, storytelling and song. A lynchpin to the Lucky Plush formula is whip-smart comedic timing, and a blurring of onstage and off, meaning the dancers get to be themselves onstage. What we’re looking at, usually, appears like both a rehearsal and a performance, stories within stories, as if we are witnessing the construction of a dance in real time.

We aren’t, of course. [Artistic director Julia Rhoads](#) is nothing if not detail-oriented, carefully crafting each of her company’s productions, often in close collaboration with theater director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig. But I’d be lying by omission to leave out that, for this critic, Lucky Plush has been in a bit of a funk. The past several projects nearly abandoned dance as the company placed an increased amount of attention on text and physical theater. And for me, they fell flat. First iterations of “Rink Life,” which began with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago in 2017 and continued with an excerpt presented at part of Lucky Plush’s “Tab Show” at the Harris Theater the next year, seemed to be a continuation of that trend.

Another year in the slow cooker has brought out all the flavor “Rink Life” needs. This fun-filled, nifty nod at skate culture in the disco era is complete with colorful tweeds and polyester galore, plus hints of an old-school, psychedelic atmosphere via sparingly used colorful lights and a disco ball (by lighting designer Rachel Levy).

But it's not exactly "Xanadu" — actual skates never make an appearance, with on- and off-rink moments differentiated by a waddling motion, as if walking on carpet in the viewing area, or balancing on toe stoppers. In some ways, this makes the thing even more absurd — in a good way, I think, though there doesn't seem to be a rhyme or reason to where the rink's parameters are, when they're skating, and when they're not. And selfishly, I might have liked to have seen these dancers on skates.

No matter. "Rink Life" is thankfully heavier in dance than other recent projects, fully utilizing the expert physicality of performers Kara Brody, Michel Rodriguez Cintra, Jacinda Ratcliffe, Rodolfo Sánchez Sarracino, A. Raheim White, Meghann Rose Wilkinson and Melinda Jean Myers, who subbed in for Elizabeth Luse while she's on leave from the company. Per usual, most of the vocabulary is custom built for each dancer, exploiting Cintra's gymnastic ability, for example, Brody's charming groundedness, Wilkinson's silky-smooth, whimsical style, and on and on.

But there is enough unison dancing and playful phrasework to satisfy even the most ardent of dance fans, despite too-low ceilings for proper partnering and a total absence of recorded music. In fact, these performers sing nearly the whole time, accompanying themselves, alternating between solfege, pop songs, disco hits and golden oldies from a plethora of decades — everything from Madonna's "Like a Virgin," to "A Whole New World" from Disney's "Aladdin," to "Hey Jude."

All in all, it's 15 tracks, sung a capella, mixed brilliantly by vocal coach Bethany Clearfield. But again, the soundtrack is not firmly planted in the disco era, or anywhere else too specific. After all, Lucky Plush shows all hinge on the performers being themselves, so the premise might be different, but with returning cast members and some residue from previous projects like "Punk Yankees," and "Cinderbox," watching "Rink Life" kind of feels like we've seen this show before.

After an all-skate — the dancers swishing their feet as they dance an ovular pattern, humming their own individual soundtracks as they round each bend, Ratcliffe returns to the rink after time away, questioning whether she wants to join back up with a community that is fun and caring, but also gossipy, petty at times, and has little in common but the time they spend skating. Ratcliffe and Myers fight over Cintra, who's splitting his time learning multiple pairs routines while managing an already too-full schedule. White is generally the peace maker, "holding space" for members of the group to express what they need to.

It sounds a bit silly, right? It is, and it is just like Lucky Plush to pull on such ridiculous threads, speaking to the minutiae of our lived experiences as humans. Together. On skates.

Review: "Rink Life" (3 stars)

When: Through Nov. 16

Where: Lucky Plush at Steppenwolf's 1700 Theatre, 1700 N. Halsted St.

Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$15-\$40 at 312-335-1650 and www.steppenwolf.org

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