

BUZZ CENTER STAGE

CHICAGO'S ENTERTAINMENT SOURCE SINCE 2006



Sunday, 10 November 2019 23:45

DANCERS TAKE FLIGHT, AND GIVE VOICE, IN RINK LIFE



Rink Life is a dance performance with a difference: these dancers also speak. And sing. And act.

Dance is said to have five elements – body, action, space, time and energy. But creative director Julia Rhoads (she was once part of Red Moon) adds voice as another component to that repertoire.

Over the course of 75 minutes (no intermission) *Rink Life* features a series of vignettes – perhaps one-act playlets – performed by seven dancers (Kara Brody, Michel Rodriguez Cintra, Melinda Jean Myers, Jacinda Ratcliffe, Rodolfo Sánchez Sarracino, A. Raheim White, Meghann Rose Wilkinson), roughly

following the rise and fall in emotional dynamics that might flow through any social group.



The vignettes are interwoven – opening with a duo (Myers and Cintra) rehearsing a pas de deux to Madonna's "Like a Virgin," that quickly devolves into a discussion between the two of whether Madonna's line is "for the very first time" or, "for the thirty-first time" as one dancer mistakenly has it. These two are interrupted when two other dancers arrive, announcing they have the space reserved. Then others appear until the full complement of the troupe is on stage.

While *Rink Life* uses roller rink culture of the 1970s as a jumping off point, it is only loosely tied to its song playlist from the period.

What would otherwise be hackneyed music choices – Hey Jude, Stayin' Alive, Total Eclipse of the Heart – are completely refreshed here. Rather than threadbare recordings, the dancers voice and interpret the songs, drawing out the beats they need to keep the dances in rhythm. Bethany Clearfield, who has worked with Music of the Baroque, is vocal collaborator and coach.

Rink Life's staging and choreography are said to be built from the spatial rules and social codes of a roller rink. Its script or libretto is samplings of those and other songs, and of "passing conversations, distant whispers, pop-song earworms, and found scripts" as Lucky Plush Productions describes it.

In successive scenes one or another of the dancers isolates themselves from the group, or is ostracized – and we watch the familiar dynamics of rapprochement and resolution. This may all be expressed in very 1970s catch phrases – "I wasn't feeling it" is a recurring concern as the dancers mount numbers – but the scenes depict fundamental constancies in human social dynamics too.

Each of the performers has a distinct personality on stage and several moments in the spotlight. But Cintra and White stand out, while Melinda Myers reminded me so much of a dancing version of comedienne Kristen Wiig.

Refreshing as an Italian ice, Rink Life brings a continuously unexpected take how people get along in groups. Rink Life runs through November 17 at Steppenwolf Theatre's cozy 1700 space.