

Lucky Plush finds the magic of reality TV in 'Cinderbox 2.0' - 4 stars

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Alice down the rabbit hole, Julia Rhoads drops the viewer into an absurd, maddening, enchanted universe in the new "Cinderbox 2.0." Tantalizing, Byzantine, and often hilarious, this sextet skitters between the worlds of television, theater, and the dance studio—and surpasses them all.



"Cinderbox 2.0," performed by Rhoads' Lucky Plush Productions, follows up on her 2007 "Cinderbox 18," which used reality TV to examine, well, the nature of reality. Much of the material, mood, and cast is new in the 2.0 version, though Rhoads has retained some of her favorite bits. It runs this weekend and next at Links Hall, in repertory with Rhoads' equally entertaining and Byzantine "The Better Half"—a 2011 co-creation with 500 Clown's Leslie Danzig—inspired by George Cukor's 1944 noir melodrama, "Gaslight."

In the cockeyed reality-show contests of "Cinderbox 2.0," weird feats abound. Remarkably, Rhoads maintains two very different perspectives on them: the young child's delight in the body as a plaything and the world-weary adult's vision of the competitive chaos engendered by that delight. Who hasn't observed—or parented—the child whose every endeavor, including just jumping into a pool, must be witnessed and applauded? Put six such children in the same room, and you've got "Cinderbox 2.0."

The arc of the piece, filled with spoken texts devised by Rhoads and the cast, is complex. It begins slowly in the everyday, then moves into a lawless series of show-off dance solos punctuated by seemingly off-the-cuff humorous commentary by Meghann Wilkinson and Francisco Aviña, competing with the dancing for our attention. Watching Benjamin Wardell's impressive series of gymnastic moves on a folding chair, which concludes with a dismount, Wilkinson shrieks to Aviña that she's seen this before, at the gym, on the treadmill. Right.

Later, with the unobtrusive aid of composer Michael Caskey, video designer John Boesche, and lighting designer/stage manager Kevin Rechner, Rhoads effects transformative moments that change the tenor from snarky to sublime. Aviña's mundane consumerist monologue about bottled Fiji water gets refashioned into a lyrical vision of paradise. The dorky music for Melinda Jean Myers' "best of" solo returns to accompany a magical moment of community. Such moments don't come easy, nor are they uncomplicated. Egotism likewise returns, and with a vengeance. But by the end, the dancers' piercing uniqueness—Marc Macaranas' simultaneous crumping and ballet, Cassandra Porter's astounding removal of her stretchy shorts—have created affection, among performers and audience alike, for the hammy human.