



LUCKY PLUSH PRODUCTIONS "PUNK YANKEES"

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By **Laura Molzahn**

In honor of her company's tenth anniversary, choreographer Julia Rhoads takes a mad gallop through dance history-her own, her dancers', and a century's worth of concert and pop dance. Well, she does narrow it down a bit: the pop is mostly recent, the concert mostly modern. We all have our niches.

Most dance troupes celebrate anniversaries with a grand sense of their importance. But as Thursday's opening of "Punk Yankees" made clear, Lucky Plush doesn't. Initially intrigued by the idea of sampling her own work, Rhoads moved on to consider the phenomenon of sampling generally, the concept and history of appropriation, and the theft of intellectual property. Sprawling beyond the bounds of her own creativity, she decided to pay tribute to the many artists who've shaped the shape-shifting art of dance, and hers in particular.

You don't have to be a dance scholar, though, to enjoy "Punk Yankees." There's a joke or comic surprise around every corner, and the piece is larded with high-tech gimmicks: onstage computer terminals, live-feed video, and helpful projections of all kinds. Beyonce's "Single Ladies" video plays side-by-side with Bob Fosse's "Mexican Breakfast" trio in its "Ed Sullivan Show" debut. When two performers mime and name-drop their way through a long line of dance greats, a thumbnail portrait of each one appears on the rear wall.

Rhoads and the other seven dancers talk a lot, seeming to chat off-the-cuff about what they're doing though in fact Rhoads wrote the texts. (It's a tribute to her writing and the performers' delivery that this talk seldom sounds scripted.) In some ways the 90-minute "Punk Yankees" is like an illustrated comic lecture, with the emphasis on "comic." Its attitude is fundamentally paradoxical, tongue-in-cheek, and subversive, cutting the ground out from under itself in successive moments. That list of dance icons, for example, concludes with "Lucky Plush Productions." Yet Rhoads seems to wink at the hubris of putting herself at the end of this long, illustrious lineage, even if it is her anniversary.

Some of the paradoxes might flow from Rhoads's ambivalence about the value of attribution. A good portion of "Punk Yankees" is almost compulsively devoted to naming names. Some sections of the piece are like lec-dems, with the dancers identifying the sources of phrases; and more than 50 sampled works are listed in the program, in addition to three social dances and four TV programs or films. But the final section undercuts the aspiration to give credit where credit is due: feverishly written efforts to attribute little snippets of the dancing devolve into phrases like "classic group melt" and "do-si-do."

Piling reference upon reference, image upon image, dance upon dance, "Punk Yankees" can feel as herky-jerky, as cluttered as our overloaded culture. Having the world at your fingertips, thanks to the miracle of technology, can be seductive. And "Punk Yankees" certainly capitalizes on that. But Rhoads also provides some respite from overload, in movement sections without text or visuals. Near the end, a string of feverish dances set to a brilliant mash-up of variations on Ravel's "Bolero" (by Yea Big, or Stefen Robinson) produces both anxiety and catharsis.

The intellectual sampling in "Punk Yankees" is definitely fun. But the fluctuations in feeling tone can be problematic. The lack of a single choreographic vision, of a single vocabulary, makes it difficult for emotion to develop. And usually the mood is lighthearted, so when it sinks into something deeper, as it does occasionally in the second half, we don't know how to take it. At one point two dancers, piled atop each other, suddenly turn on the audience, asking what we're laughing at? This is serious, they say, appropriation is nothing but stealing the fruits of another's labor. Their indignation at copycatting seems genuine, even though one dancer consistently mimicks the other, speaking a split-second later.

The intriguing but faint undercurrent of anger in "Punk Yankees" is tied to issues of money and identity. Health insurance is briefly mentioned near the beginning-many dancers don't have it, of course. And they're unlikely to get it in a culture that is less and less inclined to reward artists for what they produce.