

Chicago Tribune

Steal this dance: Rhoads takes on property rights in 'Punk Yankees'

By Sid Smith

October 24, 2009

In "Punk Yankees," Julia Rhoads and her Lucky Plush Productions take on what may well be the biggest intellectual dilemma of our age.

Theft.

The Internet didn't so much rewrite the old property rules as abandon them. Riffing off a case in which pop star Beyonce and company pretty much copied Bob Fosse in a music video without crediting him, "Punk Yankees" investigates ownership of dance in a time of YouTube, file sharing and all manner of uncredited borrowing on the blogosphere.



Punk Yankees, Photo: William Frederking

But, applying her trademark sardonic, oh-what-the-heck-shrug brand of humor, Rhoads finds much of this funny. "Punk Yankees," full of spoken text, background movies and even a live Twitter session with the audience, is dance-theater mixed with sketch comedy, and thank goodness. The pop music industry whines interminably about its lost millions. While there's a tinge of art-house snobbery here, "Punk Yankees" indirectly reminds us that most dancers live without such lucre their entire careers.

More than just denounce plagiarism, which Rhoads does, she sees the issue as layered and perplexing. What really is ownership, especially in an art dependent on the ultimately finite moves of the human body?

For Rhoads, the answer is a production that almost literally borrows from everything and gives full credit. "Punk Yankees" is a dizzying trip through serious and recreational dance spanning centuries in the West and Rhoads' own time in Chicago. Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp and Merce Cunningham get their nods. So do Chicagoans Brian Jeffrey, Peter Carpenter and Billy Siegenfeld.

Messy and in need of trims, inconsistent and occasionally frantic, sometimes a shtick-ish case of Found Art Meets the Trockaderos, "Punk Yankees" is by end a terrific odyssey, full of amusing, varied and tireless dancing by a troupe of dancers who ably double as comics. Fascinating quotes include everything from a short glimpse of Paul Taylor's "Esplanade" (my favorite) to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and a rousing, gloriously silly pop finish to video from French oddity Denis Lavant.

Lucky Plush turns 10 this season, and some 70 percent of the quotes come from the troupe's own work. Still, there's no finer way to celebrate a birthday than to show off so many gifts sent to you by everyone else.