

Chicago Tribune

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IN PERFORMANCE 'Trip the Light Fantastic: The Making of SuperStrip'

Comic heroes bumble toward true meaning

BY LAURA MOLZAHN
Chicago Tribune

Immensely likable and entertaining, Lucky Plush Productions' "Trip the Light Fantastic: The Making of SuperStrip" has a lot going for it — and a lot going on. Video projections; fast-paced, overlapping dialogue; seven superhero characters, each with an old name, a new name and a back story; dance and movement; music and sound effects. All create a head-spinning comic whirlwind.

Then there are the concepts.

Performed Thursday night only at the Harris Theater, which helped commission this 90-minute piece, "SuperStrip" made a somewhat problematic transition from Lucky Plush's usual intimate spaces to a big venue. Though the performers were miked, only some spoke audibly and with authority. At times their body language and facial expressions, which would have been perfectly legible in a tidy space, became illegible. Though the "graphic novel" panel

design and projections added dimension and power, they couldn't completely make up for the loss of Lucky Plush's essential dance-theater touches.

Directed and choreographed by Julia Rhoads in collaboration with the performers and designers, "SuperStrip" takes a self-reflexive course common in Lucky Plush shows. This isn't "SuperStrip" *per se* but the making of it.

Determined to create a collective that will boost their failing superpowers, these renegades have agreed to submit to the groupthink of successful nonprofits and brand themselves. The thankless task of organizing their meetings falls to prissy superhero Sparky Lightstep (Meghann Wilkinson, whose perfect lingo is hilarious). Meanwhile an ordinary human audio/visual techie (Sojourner Wright, an oasis of beneficent calm) records the process for advertising purposes.

Like other nonprofit groups, this one tries to uncover the beliefs that motivate them, trotting out all the good buzz-



WILLIAM FREDERKING PHOTO

Lucky Plush Productions' new dance-theater work features superheroes, of a sort.

words: Is their mission education? Beauty? Human rights? Environmental action? The promulgation of breast-feeding? Unable to come up with a catchy name, they start calling themselves the Think Tank in Support of Doing, or TTISOD, which the superheroes insist on pronouncing "titty-sod."

The movement, including dance, is sometimes off-the-wall — the volleyball re-creation is funny but just weird — and sometimes supports the texts. All the superheroes introduce themselves verbally and physically: Springster (Michel Rodriguez Cintra) excels at flying, Rapid Glitch (Daniel Gibson) at deafening landings, Professor Visionne (Elizabeth Luse) at abstruse thought, Shadow (Marc Macaranas) at mind control, Mmm (Melinda

Jean Myers) at flying (maybe), The Big Libejinski (Benjamin Wardell) at being beautiful and Sparky Lightstep at growing things.

Like the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Man, these characters are searching for powers they already have — and which they never had in the form they imagine. But while the stories are amusing, they take time without really going anywhere. Only Mmm's story evolves, an evolution that guides the close of "SuperStrip."

Simultaneous vulnerability and strength are the saving grace of this chaotic, even nihilistic world, in which all concepts of good self-destruct. In her most successful thought experiment, Lightstep asks them to line up in order of power — a disaster, as they all

jockey for first position. So she asks them to line up in order of privilege, which sorts them by factors like race and education. And they angle for lower positions.

All want to be powerful but perceived with sympathy, perhaps pity. Introducing the concept of the rhizome, a nonhierarchical way of perceiving the world, is a Band-Aid on the gaping wound of our social ills. "SuperStrip" doesn't offer a pretty picture of the arts' direction, and it doesn't have to. But if only comic attractiveness separates us from the abyss, that's a place too scary to go unacknowledged.

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