

Stories and creators come together in Lucky Plush Dance's 'Rooming House'

Chris Jones

4-4 minutes



Lucky Plush dancers Aaron R. White, Kara Brody and Meghann Wilkinson star in "Rooming House," a dance theater work from Lucky Plush Productions. (Alan Epstein photo)

Whither contemporary dance in the golden age of the podcast? Can it fuse?

Those provocative questions present themselves at the beginning of "Rooming House," the interesting and experimental dance-text-story fusion piece going on in Steppenwolf's intimate 1700 Theatre, which now sports a new floor suitable for dancers.

As the 75-minute piece from Lucky Plush Productions begins, you hear snippets of conversations from the six performers. They're telling stories of a personal nature and because they all are wearing headset microphones, it sounds like you are listening to a whole bunch of personal podcasts at once.

I've long been compelled by the intersection of dance and story and "Rooming House" is one of those pieces that, in tandem with much of the recent work at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, gives dancers individual voice and helps you, the audience member, get to know them better. That empowerment is one of the most inspiring trends in this art form. In this piece, co-created by Julia Rhoads and Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, the focus is on the making of big decisions that change your life. The artists want to draw a line between, say, Orpheus wanting to rescue his Eurydice and a dancer breaking up with her boyfriend or moving to another city.



Here's what works: You actually get to see the dancers' own preoccupations, however esoteric, and, it seems, the professional problem of how to manifest that through movement. It's a window into the choreographic process, to some extent, but also a meditation on how story begets form. It's very cool to watch. And these dancers — Kara Brody, Michel Rodriguez Cintra, Elizabeth Luse, Rodolfo Sanchez Sarracino, Aaron R. White and Meghann Wilkinson — embrace the notion of spontaneous creativity. Sometimes with thrilling results.

That said, "Rooming House" gets overly obsessed with foregrounding its own structure of myth and backstory and "story rooms" and other such structural jargon at times. Most pieces like this — conceits that show you the gestation of a story and then the story itself — succeed when they explode and exploit the contrast between the two realms of the performer. Think of the last number of "A Chrous Line," which sends all the process that has gone before into sharp relief.

You also cannot be seen to abandon your story, which "Rooming House" often seems to do on a whim. Sure, there always are other stories to tell and dance, but an audience at a piece like this wants to know that the stories being chosen are vitally important, at least in the mind of the tellers (here, the dancers). That's where the emotional engagement is to be found, where the stakes can rise and a collective spirit can soar. At this juncture, that process is just beginning.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Review: "Rooming House" (2.5 stars)

Where: Steppenwolf 1700 Theatre, 1700 N. Halsted St.

Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

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