



## Lucky Plush's 'Rooming House' offers a Rubik's Cube exploration of the mind trying to make sense of incomplete information

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*By Sheri and Josh Flanders*

*Sheri and Josh are an interracial, married, Chicago-based comedy writing and performing duo and contributors to ChicagolandMusicalTheatre.com. The following conversation was spawned by attending Lucky Plush's production "Rooming House."*

Sheri: First, let me just say that *Rooming House* is definitely recommended. It is an ambitious accessible fusion of dance and theater that will leave you smiling and thinking long after the play is over. The description says that the performance examines the question: "What makes a person do something that could have life-changing consequences?"

Josh: Yes, this is a new, high-energy, fun show that does not let up. I love the rhythmic heart-beat that permeates much of the dance numbers connecting the music to our body's natural internal rhythm. It's thrilling to see a dance performance that integrates other art forms such as theater and comedy because it makes the experience much more welcoming while still maintaining the interpretive mystery and innate beauty of great dance. Acting is one thing, but acting while dancing is an amazing feat of endurance that this cast nails!

Other aspects of the performance, such as coming out in casual clothes, saying things like "let's try that again" and writing things down on paper gave the performance a rough and unpolished feeling at times, much like it was improvisation. That's familiar territory for us.



Sheri: I felt exactly the same. As actors and instructors, our primary art form is improv, yet there is often little overlap between the improv community and the “traditional” acting community. I always find it exciting when a theater company “discovers” an improvisational voice for the first time. Fusion works like this showcase both the creative promise of untapped potential and a few rookie improv mistakes.

At its best, *Rooming House* feels like a Harold (an improvised play concept-structure) that any team would be proud to present, deconstructing an idea in an intellectually funny, physically engaging way. Improvisers especially should flock to watch this production for a vision of what a longform improv show could be. The naturalistic manner of laypeople having a pseudo-intellectual discussion is light and funny, and the nontraditional structure means that audiences will not get ahead of the story, able to predict what will happen next. It keeps the audience curious and delighted the way that a great improv show does. There is a lot for an improviser who is seeking to push the envelope to learn.

And the writers of *Rooming House* could learn a thing or two from improvisers. The script is peppered with newbie improv (and writing) moves like talking about action. Lines such as “let’s go to the wedding” (rather than just trusting that the audience is smart enough to catch up) make for clunky, sophomoric transitions and pull us out of the otherwise electric action. Large parts of the story are dedicated to discussing people who aren’t onstage, unnecessary when there are 6 more interesting, compelling and talented dancers to learn about. Actors who use improv as a tool to develop written works would have edited these things out. Actors and improvisers: learn from one another! (Steps off soapbox. Pauses. Gets back on soapbox) Also, do something amazing and special with those beer cans or cut them. (Steps off soapbox. Pauses. Steps back on) I have SO many opinions. I’m emotionally involved. Great theater should provoke. This does.



Josh: The ham-handed inserting of the Greek myth at the top and nail-on-the-head transitions definitely pulls me out of the story. On the other hand, this is a show about breaking expectations and so I kind of relished in having to explore this part of my mind.

The show is energetic, exciting and engaging, and the characters were individually developed enough that I was interested the whole time. I was not engaged in any one storyline, but instead pulled through it seeing different facets. This is not entirely a linear story. It's more like *Choose Your Own Adventure*, where the audience is exposed to every possible ending, option, storyline and question (oh, the questions!) to get a complete picture by considering all angles. Sometimes this works extremely well, and at times it almost seems silly.

Sheri: Yes, they successfully walk the tightrope without falling into cheesy territory and avoid it because the beautifully gentle story arc is highly complex and satisfying. The story is essentially a Rubik's Cube exploration of the human mind trying to make sense of incomplete information and difficult truths. It is controlled schizophrenia embodied through dance and word.

Josh: I think you literally just re-wired my brain.

Sheri: You're welcome. The bones of the work are strong and expertly assembled. However in my opinion at the beginning, none of the characters are established and it is difficult to care about them as they muse, pontificate and wax poetic. They are all head and no body or heart.



Josh: This play is maybe a metaphor for the journey from head to heart...the one that we all must make?

Sheri: I agree with that. However, the first third feels untethered (perhaps purposefully so) and I think the story robs itself from an additional level of emotional depth by not giving each character more development at the start. By the end of the work we begin to care. About half of the characters have become well-rounded, some have been partially developed, but a few are still mostly blank slates. In a large cast, it is possible to get away with under-developing some characters; but in a cast of six it makes the work seem unfinished. When the lights go down at the end, it feels unfinished, more like the end of an act rather than the end of the piece. I hope they explore this concept further, there is more rich territory to explore. Understand I am not at all saying that the work is bad – this is the difference between amazing and masterpiece. I'm like a strict mom: I know you are destined to be a valedictorian, Lucky Plush. Now turn off Gossip Girl and go study.

Josh: I know that this piece is intended to be more than just dance. It's funny, it's theatrical, it's musical and it's dance – it does the dance portion very well and the theater not quite as well. The teacher in me gives the dance an A+, and the story a B.

The characters get rapid-fire treatments exposing just enough to entice and leave the audience wanting more – one of the more interesting ones (seemingly autobiographical) were the two dancers born in Cuba (**Michel Rodrigues Cintra** and **Rodolfo Sanchez Sarracino**) who speak passionately in English and Spanish about various topics, including life in Cuba before coming to the US.



(From left) Lucky Plush dancers Meghann Wilkinson, Elizabeth Luse, Rodolfo Sánchez Sarracino, Aaron R. White, Michel Rodriguez Cintra and Kara Brody perform a sneak-peek scene of *Rooming House* at the company's Plucky Lush benefit in May, 2017. The newest dance theater work devised by Lucky Plush Productions, *Rooming House* explores the question: what makes a person do something that could have life changing consequences? *Rooming House* premieres with a three-week run and 14 performances in Steppenwolf's new 1700 Theatre, November 4-18, 2017. Tickets: [Steppenwolf.org](http://Steppenwolf.org), [LuckyPlush.com](http://LuckyPlush.com) or call (312) 335-1650. Photo credit: Philamonjaro

Sheri: The choreography is excellent and overall well-executed in an easy, playful way that enhances the story and results in great moments of slapstick physical comedy. Without giving away too much, the structure of the play hinges on a pattern game that covers a wide variety of dance styles, from contemporary, to Cuban to nightclub and line-dance, aggressive, dazzling lifts that made me gasp in amazement, and what can only be described as unusually absurd human sculpture that causes the audience to guffaw in delight. There is also an unexpected moment of killer song by **Aaron R. White** that could be the club-banger of the summer if given the chance. Please let me know when that single drops.

Josh: The golden thread of *Rooming House* is the relationship between the six characters; they are all dancers, and actors playing roles, and dancers playing themselves, all interwoven with movement and music. These six people listen to each other, support each other, question each other and themselves, follow each other's lead, and use play to explore the motivations behind the often-unseen acts of bravery that help us all survive. It's a positive testament to the power of support and cooperation, but also just a darn good dance show.

*Lucky Plus Productions* presents "*Rooming House*" as part of the *LookOut Series* at Steppenwolf's 1700 Theatre, 1700 N. Halsted Street, Chicago, through November 18. More information and tickets are available [here](#).