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A Dance-Theater Take on Noir Thriller

By Karen Campbell | March 11, 2013

“Do you think we’re all living in utter confusion?” asks a character in Lucky Plush Productions’ “The Better Half.” Confusion, perhaps. Utter, no. There is clever method in the fractured madness of this dance-theater twist on the Ingrid Bergman-Charles Boyer noir thriller, “Gaslight.” There is also delicious humor and a dark, poignant undercurrent that makes this 75-minute work by the Chicago-based troupe both charming and memorably provocative, posing question after question on the nature of reality, identity, and human relationships.



Co-created and directed by Leslie Buxbaum Danzig and Julia Rhoads, the work’s opening setup is that of a casting call for an undetermined play, and four of the work’s five performers try to figure out exactly who they’re supposed to be portraying, information Timothy Heck’s “guy with a script” doles out only sparingly. From there, the work unfurls like an extended, very sophisticated improvisation skit

with good literary bones and a vibrant movement aesthetic that seeds the action with choreography that is both telling and refreshingly organic.

Adrian Danzig and Rhoads portray the central “Gaslight” couple, Mr. and Mrs. Manningham. Their repeated movement sequence hints at their shifting dynamic. A getting-to-know-you child’s clapping game morphs into a forced swoon with his hand grabbing the back of her neck in a twist. They flip and tumble through convoluted couplings, she finally ending up on his shoulders in a nifty turnabout.

Gradually the “gaslighting” begins. She’s accused of taking keys, losing a dry cleaning receipt, moving a picture, and we see the dissolution of trust, the onset of paranoia. But “Gaslight” gradually shifts into a bit from Ingmar Bergman’s “Scenes From a Marriage.” Roles mutate, and other bits of “recontextualized screenplays” filter in. At one point, Francisco Aviña pops from spotlight to spotlight, trying to cover all the roles. He dances with a silky, loose-limbed elegance, but he’s most memorable as the apron-clad young servant Nancy. His fey, faun-like opening the door motif is a hoot every time. All the performers combine impressive technical facility with charismatic theatricality, the ensemble dances flowing with the supported floor work and fluid weight exchanges of contact improvisation.

“The Better Half” thrives in a kind of messy surrealism, a capricious game in which the rules keep changing and the players are sporadically plunged into chaos. It’s futile to look for linearity or cohesion, which the audience seems to mind less than the performers. At one point, Rhoads says with frustration, “I don’t know what’s real anymore. I don’t know what’s in the script.” By the end, questions of identity come to the fore, not just “What is my character supposed to be?” but “How can I not know who I am. Who am I?” Well, that’s one for all of us, isn’t it?