



The Better Half Review - Lucky Plush's Innovative, Surreal Dance Theater Evening

By Ginger Lane



Using the basic plot of the 1944 mystery thriller, *Gaslight*, as a jumping off point for its humorous - moving to dark - dance theater piece, *The Better Half* revolves around the complex marital relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Manningham (**Adrian Danzig** and co-creative director **Julia Rhoads**). Their two maids, Elizabeth and Nancy, hilariously portrayed by **Meghann Wilkinson** and **Francisco Aviña**, neither of whom can figure out who she/he is, add another dimension and contribute to the larger questions of reality versus fantasy, order versus chaos, clarity vs. confusion. Are these characters who they seem to be? Originally performed in 2011, this incarnation has new material.

Uniting theater and dance into one performance piece offers a unique way to explore possibilities and tell a story to discover whether there is trust and resilience in relationships. Co-creators and co-directors **Leslie Buxbaum Danzig**, co-founder of the physical theater company **500 Clown**, and **Lucky Plush Productions** founding artistic director, dancer, and choreographer **Julia Rhoads**, have developed a work steeped in comedy, physical humor, and the darker tensions of romantic relationships. These "layers of fiction and reality accumulate, revealing the elusive boundaries between life and borrowed plotlines." Adding theater work onto dance work, or the reverse, can be quite revealing in itself.

The show opens with 3 performers somewhat tentatively finding their places on stage, a narrator/director perched on a stool at the edge of the stage, with mike and script in hand, about to begin directing, and a 4th performer who enters late, disrupts the stage placement and opening poses of the other three, foreshadowing the chaos that is about to erupt. Clearly full of himself, he becomes the center of attention, interrupting, creating confusion, taking up floor space, and constantly exiting the space, as if not wanting to deal with his marriage-easier to walk out than confront the relationship.



Building on what may initially have started as contact improvisation, wherein one performer initiates contact with a second, eliciting an improvised response by the second, the movement vocabulary of *The Better Half* is full of action verbs: flying, leaping, falling, spiraling, dragging, sliding, tumbling, bouncing, springing, lifting, throwing. The frequent “over, under, around, and through” movements when the dancers are connected cleverly expressed how tangled these artists’ lives are. The very athletic acrobatics and gymnastics, with front and back flips, 1 handed cartwheels, and slapstick runs into a side wall created a circus atmosphere, and showed the high energy technical skills of the performers. And when narrator-turned Detective Rough **Michel Rodriguez Cintra** began his flips and spins towards the audience the entire front row jumped back. Fun to watch, exhausting to keep up with. **Rhoads, Wilkinson, Aviña, and Cintra** have impressive dance credits, and **Danzig** is co-founder of 500 Clown along with wife **Buxbaum Danzig**. All bring good acting chops to this show as well.



Much of the time the performers seemed not to be relating to each other but moving in their own orbits, but there is a sequence of movements in which “Elizabeth” pantomimes a desk, complete with cubbyholes side by side, which gets picked up and repeated by “Mrs. Manningham” and “Nancy”, which then develops into some expert unison work. The impact of all this movement, combined with the music/sound design by **Mikhail Fiksel**, lighting by **Heather Gilbert** and video projections of **John Boesche**, is anything but calming, reflecting the messiness of our contemporary lives.

Some movement, with a hint of danger and violence, can also be very funny, as when Mr. Manningham (the husband) repeatedly grabs his wife by the neck, turns her onto her back in the air and drags her across the floor as she skitters backwards in crab fashion. The tables are turned, however, and feminism wins out when she, tiny and fragile looking **Julia Rhoads** does the same thing to him, the sturdily built **Adrian Danzig**. The athletic balancing and tumbling of husband and wife is a great metaphor for the delicate balance of their marriage, which somehow does survive. The 75 minute *The Better Half*, although short for a full evening presentation, felt a little long as one piece. While some of the signature moves of the troupe are at first arresting, they become a bit too repetitive and tiring, with all the repeated gestures and exiting and re-entering. Additionally, those with less than perfect hearing had difficulty catching all the dialogue and asides, as the performers were not miked.



This was the first half of a double bill last Saturday, the second half being Cinderbox 2.0, for which, unfortunately, I could not stay. Both shows were performed at **Links Hall** in its new space on Western Avenue over the past two weeks. I'll look forward to more from Lucky Plush.