

Review: Lucky Plush triple threats are smart and funny, but these works don't work on the Harris stage



Lucky Plush Productions presents "Tab Show" at the Harris Theater, with dancers Kara Brody and Michel Rodriguez Cintra and company. (Benjamin Wardell photo)



By **Lauren Warnecke**
Chicago Tribune

APRIL 27, 2018, 12:05 PM

The Harris Theater's main curtain opened Thursday to a cast of familiar characters swaying their hips back and forth and bopping to the beat of their own tunes. If you listen closely, you hear a variety of songs and a count of eight sung under the breaths of five of the six ensemble members from Lucky Plush Productions, plus artistic director Julia Rhoads, who was in for Meghann Wilkinson on the opening night of "Tab Show" at the Harris Theater in Millennium Park.

The thing that ultimately brings this group together is solfège. The six performers form a clump onstage at center, singing Sol, La, Ti, etc. with their corresponding hand signals to create a series of harmonies. It's like peeking in on a glee club practice; per usual, Lucky Plush blurs the line between rehearsal and performance. They're wearing casual rehearsal clothes; at intervals, they break away from the singing to chat it out and reorganize.

This is the beginning of “Rink Life,” a development of “Cadence,” which Rhoads created for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017. “Rink Life” is said to be inspired by old-school roller skating culture.

Picture yourself at the rink, circa, maybe, 1992. You're rocking a pair of rental skates (you know, the ones with the brown boots and orange wheels). There was no social media, no cell phones — social interactions are in bits and pieces as you make your way around the rink, catching fragments of others' conversations, the content of which is muddled by different gliding speeds, music on the loud speaker, or a DJ collecting volunteers to participate in impending races.

But direct references to the roller rink don't actually surface in “Rink Life.” Instead, Rhoads crafts a score based on this idea of social fragmentation from which the dancers improvise. In this case, dancing and singing are presented in a one-to-one ratio, with Rhoads' signature nonchalance pinned against the serious challenge of holding a tune while performing modern dance.

Some of the performers (which included appearances by guest performers Ethan Kirschbaum, Jacinda Ratcliffe and Enid Smith in addition to Rhoads, Kara Brody, Michel Rodriguez Cintra, Elizabeth Luse, Rodolfo Sanchez Sarracino and Aaron-Raheim White) accomplish this better than others, with above-stage and floor microphones picking up most of the dialog in addition to all of the vocal bobbles that come with being lifted by the waist while simultaneously attempting to belt Cat Stevens' “If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out.”

Presumably, the Lucky Plush crew is better than Hubbard Street at mastering the funny nuances of Rhoads' choreographic style and the natural, witty interactions she extracts from her performers. I think that was true here, but the setting is all wrong. The MCA provided an ideal forum to witness these improvised exchanges and song lyrics passed around the stage, but for a 1,200 seat house, much of “Rink Life” came off garbled and non-descript.

The second act, an accumulation of favorite moments from past Lucky Plush works under the title “Curb Candy,” was more successful than the first.

Rhoads began a process of remixing with “Punk Yankees” in 2009, and while that work is not specifically referenced in “Curb Candy,” her ideas about reducing, reusing and recycling dance originated there. But where “Punk Yankees” borrowed from others, “Curb Candy” pulls from 15 years of Lucky Plush archives to look at its own repertoire as a series of interchangeable parts.

White balloons which appear in Rhoads' 2005 “Surrelium” are hilariously tied to floppy balloon hats as Luse, Rhoads, and White pick-up with familiar commentary from two versions of her excellent “Cinderbox” (2007 and 2013). In 2011, Rhoads mixed antics from her shiny helmet-clad space odyssey “The Window” with sections from “Endplay” (2003) and “Habituation” (2010) for Inside/Out at Jacob's Pillow. That was repeated here, thankfully keeping “Endplay's” fantastic tea party scene. “Curb Candy” is a luxurious treat for Plush loyalists, who have watched this company evolve over the past 15 years and seen all of this before, but differently. I found myself, however, feeling nostalgia for the original cast members, whose unique personalities, by design, were central to the creation of these works.

Which leads back to my earlier point about the setting. The best thing about Lucky Plush is that you come away feeling like you know the people onstage. The subtleties of Rhoads' work are so satisfying, best observed from up close. Even from the 10th row of the Harris Theater, much of that detail got swallowed.

Maybe I'm being overly harsh here. Rhoads is a master of comedic timing and physical humor; she expertly tugs at the idiosyncrasies of human nature and seamlessly blends dance, theater and music. Her best works easily place her on the short list of our city's strongest and most successful choreographers. As Lucky Plush continues to evolve and seeks recognition from larger venues and presenting organizations (which it deserves), Rhoads will have to consider if the big stage and the big house are what she really wants. If yes, her work will have to change to be better served by those spaces, or to quote Cat Stevens, "If you want to sing out, sing out."

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

ctc-arts@chicagotribune.com

Review: Lucky Plush Productions with "Tab Show" (2.5 stars)

When: Through 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.

Running time: 90 minutes

Tickets: \$25-\$70 at 312-334-7777 or www.harristheaterchicago.org

RELATED: Review: 'Poor People's TV Room' mixes Boko Haram history with Oprah — and is a tough, tough piece to unpack »

Joffrey's North American premiere of 'Midsummer' is a 'Joy.' That's its only problem. »

Read all of the Tribune's recent coverage of Chicago dance »

Copyright © 2018, Chicago Tribune

This article is related to: [Theater, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#)