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Charged pieces but a thin theme

Pilobolus' skills can still delight

BY ROY C. DICKS, Correspondent

DURHAM - For Pilobolus' annual visit to the American Dance Festival, the company has programmed some of its earliest and some of its latest work, demonstrating where it came from and where it's headed as it approaches its 40th anniversary.

Pilobolus is famed for its jaw-dropping athleticism, goofball humor and mesmerizing transformations. Two early works, "Walklyndon" (1971) and "Ocellus" (1972), confirm those elements are still enthralling. In the former, speeding bodies bump into each other, forming magnetic attachments and funhouse mirror images, the slapstick and sudden changes eliciting gasps and guffaws. In the latter, four men combine in sinuous, slow-motion waves, meshing into a single, anemone-like creature, artful in its design and awesome in its balance and tension.

Pilobolus has always been a collaborative venture, with the original performers now functioning as choreographers with newer company members. In January, company co-founder Jonathan Wolken premiered "Redline," an ominous, post-apocalyptic exercise, suggesting ties to the video game of the same name.

To thumping, buzzing rock music, an action-figure gang seems readying for a rumble, until one member becomes frightened and disoriented. From his spasms and sudden jerks, he seems to be running out of power and is eventually abandoned. The dancers' aggressive demeanors and daredevil feats sustain the mood well, but the work's few ideas don't fully maintain interest throughout.

Recently, Pilobolus began collaborating with outside artists, the 2007 ADF premiere of "Rushes" from Israeli choreographers Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak a successful result. Initially humorous but ultimately haunting, the piece centers on a large circle of chairs forming a waiting room. There, two women, a man with a suitcase and three clowning knockabouts go from individual concerns to participating in a grand ritual, transporting the women to some sort of salvation.

It's impossible to forget the beauty of the one woman's incredibly smooth, barefooted gliding and the transfixing journey of the other wrapped around the man's chest as he slowly walks a path of chairs constantly being rearranged across the stage. The choreographers' attention to detail and depth of spirituality communicate powerfully.

The Israeli pair was asked to create another ADF premiere this summer. "2b" incorporates

many of the same elements as "Rushes" but this time the work seems only a collection of unrelated ideas in a surreal nightmare. The interactions of the fish-headed dancer, the sweater-headed fisherman and the couple who live behind the tiny movable door have arresting moments but are unsatisfying in their "anything goes" mode.

A thematic glimmer of man's destruction of nature is not enough to tie it all together. Best to enjoy the ever-amazing physicality and startling combinations the dancers continue to achieve.

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Details

What: Pilobolus at American Dance Festival

Where: Durham Performing Arts Center

When: 8 p.m. today; children's matinee, 1 p.m. today

Cost: \$22-\$43; matinee, \$14

Contact: 680-2787, www.tickets.duke.edu , www.dpacnc.com

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