

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

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DANCE REVIEW

'Oyster' fascinates at ADF

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DURHAM – This year's American Dance Festival theme, "What is Dance Theater?" could have no better conversation starter than the performances this weekend by the Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Polak Dance Company in its signature work, "Oyster."

Although hints of what to expect were in this Israeli company's two collaborations with Pilobolus here in 2007 and 2009, "Oyster" allows the company to fully display its special brand of dance. "Oyster" has been seen around the world since its premiere in 1999, arriving here with a long pedigree of praise.

The references and similarities reviewers have assigned it over the years – Federico Fellini, Tim Burton, Cirque du Soleil, vaudeville, sideshow, cabaret – are certainly apt, but choreographer/directors Pinto and Pollak turn these elements into their own separate world.

It's a shadowy realm where strings of lights outline a carnival tent whose upstage opening emits a constant stream of oddities and freaks. Chief among them are a ballerina whose bottom has a small chair conveniently attached, a zombielike caretaker, and a two-headed man wheeled around on a platform. These three are in charge of a show in which a variety of strange performers appear, all in whiteface and frizzy wigs.

These performers go about their duties robotically, accomplishing their tricks without enthusiasm, their trace-like expressions suggesting routine drudgery and even coercion and cruelty. But just as we marvel at circus animals without thinking about their lives outside the big top, we can be dazzled by their wondrous feats.

A woman in a hoop skirt floats magically in a harness, balancing on her partner's head or swirling around him like a moth to a flame. Three armless men lurch precariously while dancing wildly about, finally falling to the floor and rolling out of sight. Two women dance with ribbons tied from their hands to their feet, self-manipulating marionettes that slump when the caretaker cuts their ribbons. Four decrepit choristers shuffle along until they are suddenly jolted into a frenzied mambo as if electrified. Throughout, an eclectic range of music, bird-calls and wind blasts accompanies the performers.

This combination of dance, acrobatics, illusion and characterization might not fulfill everyone's idea of dance, but it's undeniably fascinating and often mesmerizing. Although only an hour, the production offers an evening's worth of surprises and mysteries, thought-provoking for adults but suitably entertaining for children as well.

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