

The Oregonian

Dance theater of the surreal

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CATHERINE THOMAS

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Crack the shell on "Oyster," the bizarre dance-theater work by Israeli choreographer Inbal Pinto and director Avshalom Pollak, and out spill curiosities from some twisted circus sideshow of the imagination.

Bathed in the nostalgia of bygone vaudeville, "Oyster" is a cabaret populated by marionettes and their handlers, each more outlandish than the last: a giant two-headed man, a dancer with an arm as long as her body.

It's like a surreal burlesque. "Oyster," which plays Wednesday at Schnitzer Hall in the White Bird dance series, rolls out characters with a mix of fairy-tale enchantment and freak-show perversity. There's no real story, just an odd parade of misfits -- mimes, acrobats and ballerinas in face paint and fright wigs -- and repeated themes of manipulation and control, including leashes, trap doors and death by suffocation.

But even when it's violent, "Oyster" is a world suffused with a strange melancholy, a mix of darkness and absurdity and the camaraderie of wayward souls. They may be outcasts from Geppetto's toy shop, but these puppets still have some tricks up their sleeves: An overcoat opens to reveal a stage, a ballerina walks a tightrope of a man's outstretched arms.

That sense of illusion permeates Pinto's movement. There's a dance of the derrieres, a dance on a flying bell cord, a dance for armless men. Even the score is disjointed, flickering between old-time music hall, operatic arias and Tuvan throat singing.

Pollak, who arranged the score and directs, calls "Oyster's" surreal puppet-master atmosphere the desire "to have multiple stories. . . . We thought about us as human beings that want to be perfect -- to gain the highest level of beauty or strength or professionalism -- because someone expects us to do it, controlling us. . . . In our creations, there is always a thin line between the grotesque and beauty, sadness and happiness."

Not surprisingly, they looked to freak shows. And to memory: "At the beginning of the show, the girl who holds her leg to her head and is jumping on one leg, that came from Inbal as a teenager. She had a roommate who used to tie her leg to the bed at night to make her more flexible [as a dancer]. It's absurd, it's grotesque. At the same time, it's something very real. We use it and twist it to make a world that's very fantastic and far away, but at the same time is our world, our lives."

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway; \$23-\$49, Ticketmaster 503-224-4400.