

Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company

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Carnival of the Bizarre: Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company at ADF

On Friday night, I happened upon a strange, sad carnival that was somehow part of the 2010 American Dance Festival. The wind whistled, a bell jingled, and a cast of knobby-kneed men, human marionettes, an organ grinder, wind-up ballerinas, armless dancers, and a two-headed man hobbled, slouched, and tiptoed through. The Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company performed the evening-length work "Oyster" (1999) at the Durham Performing Arts Center (June 17-June 19). Inspired by a short story by Tim Burton, this darkly comic and touching performance also had a touch of Edward Gorey in its dimly lit and grotesque aesthetic.

Pinto's and Pollak's whimsical choreography takes the form of a series of vignettes that feature ballet, mime, modern dance, physical comedy and acrobatics. The twelve dancers appear as multiple characters, clothed in extravagant and fanciful costumes; their faces are painted white, with doll-like make-up, and their hair stands on end. Strings of lights frame the stage and the performers' door to the "circus tent", which is built into the back of the stage. Despite the carnival atmosphere of "Oyster," there is a quietness to the performance, as if these characters might always communicate without saying a word.

In this odd world, the unexpected happens. Bodies don't behave as anticipated: knees collapse and wobble, heads roll, ballerinas tiptoe through the air across their partner's arms. Some of the most invigorating scenes feature a group of tall men in coattails. In one scene they are armless, a controlled tilting off balance, leaning backwards, lurching around to a growly, gravelly folk song. At the end, they collapse and roll off stage, flopping and squirming. Although there was quite a lot of dance movement in the performance, the vignettes have coalesced for me into particular images rather than dance steps or sequences. The human marionettes, stiff and yet mobile, with their hands connected to their feet by a red ribbon; the repeated motif of creepy crawly fingers scabbling in another's spiky hair; four arthritic acrobats shimmying to an operatic mambo.

These characters do tend to haunt you - not because they are so disturbing, but because you have come to care about them. Much has surely been made about the dance's title and the pearly treasure hidden in the hard shell, but there is a softness, a tenderness here beneath the bizarre. The last few vignettes are particularly lovely. The two-headed man is undone, his overcoat unbuttoned to reveal a garden of tulips beneath. Two wind-up dolls dance a beautiful, sad duet, pulling a red ribbon (a marionette string) from their lips and making their way out through the tent door, now brighter than the darkening stage. The spell is released.

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