

A liberal dose of Rodeo

Third week featured friendly dance, teen angst and comedy to cry for

FESTIVAL >>REVIEW

HIGH PERFORMANCE RODEO

Runs until January 29
Epcor Centre and Tower Centre

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If Monday's federal election reconfirmed Calgary as a Conservative stronghold, the previous week's events at the High Performance Rodeo reconfirmed One Yellow Rabbit's festival as a lush island of liberal artistic expression in the sea of Tory blue.

Of course, not all that expression has gone unchecked this year. I'm referring to the teapot-tempest over the visual art exhibits in the Epcor Centre's Plus-15, hosted by the Rodeo's junior Mutton Busting festival. In a spineless, not to say awkward response to a few complaints about their supposedly offensive nature, the Epcor Centre has built a wall in the middle of the walkway, ostensibly to screen them from passers-by. Of course, the wall, the accompanying warning signs and national media coverage have only attracted more attention to the work. And by last weekend that stretch of pristine drywall had become defaced with public graffiti, some of it the kind of obscene, ignorant scribbles generally confined to public washrooms, which I personally found more offensive than anything in those art exhibits. I wonder — if I complain to the Epcor Centre, will they erect a wall to hide the wall?

Meanwhile, here's what was going on behind the walls of the Vertigo Playhouse and Big Secret Theatre....

PJS AND POETRY

Some humour surpasses all description. I'm hard-pressed to explain the free-flowing absurdity of Pajama Men Shenoah Allen and Mark Chavez and why they made me (and most of their audience) weep with laughter. This comic duo from New Mexico start their show, *Stop Not Going*, before the stage lights have even come up and then keep tearing along for 70 relentlessly silly minutes. Characters are donned and doffed like jackets, and locales shift in an eye-blink, as Allen (the dark-haired guy in the light pyjamas) and Chavez (the light-haired guy in the dark pyjamas) bombard us with their arsenal of weird voices, wacky mime, Pythonesque wordplay and oral sound effects worthy of an eight-year-old boy. The initial impression is that this is unfettered



Memories made flesh — Estelle Claret's rich ensemble work *From Julia to Émile, 1949* was performed by Montréal Danse

improv, but eventually evidence of an underlying script can be just barely discerned. Still, structure be damned — those two rough 'n' tough cowboys bemoaning their leathery hands and chapped lips, the housewife in love with a space alien and the 14-year-old girl who shoots laser beams from her eyes are so deliriously daft that to seek any hidden logic would be to spoil the fun.

Speaking of comedy and crying, there were plenty of teen tears and tantrums with *Bad Grad*. This was actor and teen-angst-poetry queen Sara Bynoe's attempt to put her popular website-turned-book into theatrical form, with the help of adaptor Shannon Leahy, director A.J. Demers and playwright Eugene Stickland. Using a high school grad ceremony-cum poetry reading as a pretext, Bynoe's Buck Assembled Artists portrayed a *Breakfast Club* assortment of adolescents reciting poems of love, hate, alienation and (of course) self pity, overseen by a sad-eyed Bynoe as the graduating class's oh-so-sensitive poetry geek and a paunchy, rumped Stickland as their sleazy principal. Some of the teen stereotypes

to perform Doug Varone's darker, more difficult and more artistic *In Thine Eyes*. A duet with Larry Hahn, to operatic music by Michael Nyman, its blunt, mechanical movement and David Ferri's razor-edged lighting were impressive, but most striking to this Baker newcomer was the way she dances as much with her arms as her feet, the former limbs appearing abnormally long as she cups and carves the air in swooping gestures, as if sculpting a world to surround her.

However, when all was said and done, my favourite dance show last week was Estelle Claret's rich, Gallic-flavoured *From Julia to Émile, 1949*, performed by Montréal Danse. Over a cup of coffee, the aging Julia (actor Louise Dussault) indulges in reveries about her postwar youth and early love, filling the café around her with young men and women from her past — danced by a seven-member ensemble with a vigorous immediacy that belies the misty nostalgia of the theme.

In contrast, *Grace* by Vancouver's Joe Ink, despite employing a sci-fi scenario and the latest in video technology, felt like a silly performance-art relic of the 1980s. Perhaps it was video designer-performer Jamie Griffiths' new wave look, or maybe the sense that she and choreographer-dancer Joe Laughlin weren't sure how to effectively mesh her high-tech tricks with his physical vocabulary, but this tiresome piece kept reminding me of the klutzy of many '80s multimedia experiments.

PEGGY'S WINNING WAYS

Peggy Baker knows how to win over an audience. The seasoned dancer's two-part show, *The Heart Moves*, opened with a warm, friendly work guaranteed to charm. *The Disappearance of Right and Left* has Baker delivering her own monologue about her life while dancing to the clean, broad-brushstroke choreography of Sarah Chase, evidently inspired by the Edmonton-bred Baker's big-sky Prairie background. The tales of her Scottish immigrant ancestry, her early marriage and her New York schooling under the grande dame of modern dance, Martha Graham, were as entertaining and accessible as the choice of music — Joni Mitchell's "Amelia" and Beethoven's "Sonata in F Minor." Then, having seduced us with this easy-to-like piece, Baker returned in the second half

MOLLER'S SUPERGROUP

The week's musical menu was written by Peter Moller, theatrical soundscape artist and drummer for Kris Demeanor's band, who stepped out of the background to present his new album, *The Shrine of impossible Love*, along with two spinoff shows — a hootenanny led by Carolyn Mark and an Ornette Coleman listening party-cum-homage.

I caught the live performance of *Shrine*, for which Moller had assembled a who's who of Western Canadian musicians, from Demeanor and Mark to blues guitarist Lester Quitzau, Painting Daisies' Rachelle van Zanten, Nathan's Keri Latimer and violinist Brigitte Dajczer of the Rembetika Hipsters — to name only a few.

The album proved as eclectic as the lineup, varying from folk-rock to hard rock, Van Morrison-ish jazzy introspection to Coleman style free-jazz cacophony — the last featured mainly in the jams between songs, conducted with a heroic effort at playfulness by former rheostatics drummer Dave Clark (who also tried to elicit some dreaded audience participation). These sections, accompanied by short films, came across less like improvisations than filler, although they did allow reed man Dan Meichel to show off his prowess on a battery of saxophones.

In the end, I left feeling unsatisfied, wishing Moller had cut the meandering interludes and let us hear more from the other talented artists onstage instead.