

Escaping Gravity

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by Chaim Eliyahu - 5 out of 5

I saw two heavy shows, back to back, last night. As fate would have it, we poured out onto the street from the second with just the necessary two minutes for me to drive up to Crosstown Station to catch a flight of fancy: Cabaret Voler. (And say it in French: voe-LAY.) It was the perfect escape from the gravitas of the first two shows — and there were drinks!

Crosstown's upstairs space was rigged with five aerial units — three great lengths of fabric, a pair of looped ropes, and a large metal diamond-shape with bars — that took our company of six exotic and barely clothed female dancers to flight. With a stage in the corner, and six larger or smaller video screens circling the room, the performers — primarily dancers and acrobats — circulated among us as we lounged in a spacious cabaret. Much of the action was tracked by live video, amplifying the effect of the performance, sometimes resulting in a hall-of-mirrors effect, reflecting a couple of performers infinitely behind themselves in media-space.

In ten segments, by my count — most just 3-5 minutes, divided by introductory patter from a ringmaster without her whip (which I mainly couldn't make out, due in part to the reverberant environment, so I missed everyone's names) — we were treated to impressive displays of dance and acrobatics and aerial dancelike acrobatics. Nowhere but Kansas City (considering this group along its aesthetic sister, Quixotic) have I seen so many exotically tattooed, pierced, bejeweled, and perfectly toned women who've practiced ascending and dropping from great heights to such aesthetic effect: an artform uniquely developed here, where free warehouse space and performer passion has sparked cumulative years of experimentation and practice.

Most of us seemed impressed not only by the finely tuned athletic and artistic wonder of it all, but by its frank, frontal sensuality and seductiveness. The show was reminiscent (often explicitly, through music) of risqué cabarets of decades past. Our performers strutted boldly up to ringside tables, staring directly into the eyes of a presumably fortunate few, displaying inner thighs in much better shape than our own. Then they'd launch into a breathtakingly inventive display of dance-acrobatics to prove it.

Performers' eyes (as well as our own) in the most frankly sensual piece of the evening, though, were focused unapologetically between two tango dancers. One clearly played the male, and both seemed jealous of the attention the other gave to some of us in the audience before they stripped away their gender-defining costume-bits and scaled the same fabric rigging. Performing a complex set of fascinating and intricate moves characteristic of Cabaret Voler's aerial performance — wrapping limbs and trunks and sometimes entire extended bodies — in yards-long loops of stretchy lycra fabric, thus hoisting themselves to the ceiling, ultimately to roll, slide or suddenly plunge back to earth. These two wound up dangling together, upside down, touching and hugging each other in ways that seemed to arouse the aesthetic passion quite a few of my fellows.

"Divinely decadent!" as Liza famously declared. But also downright impressive. A great way to spend an hour and appreciate something unique to Kansas City. Repeating Thursday and Saturday at 7 and Friday at 8:30, with an extra late show Saturday at 11:30.