

Maree ReMalia l merrygogo adds exclamation point to Community Support Art series

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By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

On Saturday night, Maree ReMalia l merrygogo added the exclamation point, literally and figuratively, to the New Hazlett Theater's inaugural Community Support Art (CSA) series, designed to commission works from emerging Pittsburgh artists.

Engagingly titled "The Ubiquitous Mass of Us," this premiere seriously questioned "the bounds of our identities and the way we take up space." But it was also symbolic of the creative process, where young artists have to learn to extend themselves, breaking down any barriers, both personal and communal, that might exist in producing a work of art.

It was obviously a subject near and dear to the hearts of the performing collective, nine strong, including Ms. ReMalia herself, and so representative of the talent and breadth of the Pittsburgh arts scene. Their passion and commitment drove the choreography and the staging, which took full advantage of both trained dancers and movers for whom dance was a second (or third) language.

It began with a breath from playwright Paul Kruse, poised high above the

audience on the Hazlett's third level ramp. He began toying with the sounds of the theater -- the railing, the curtain -- before running through the space itself and landing center stage. Scattered about were eight piles of boxes, some glued and others loose, painted with snatches of graffiti.

The other performers began to join him in this playground of the imagination. There was plenty of group think -- where all would explode, laugh or cower in fear at the same time. They broke out into duos like the flexibility challenge of splits between Moriah Ella Mason and Joseph Hall.

Absurdity reigned supreme.

Dance entered into the mix with Jil Stifel, a wide-eyed wonder, and the delightful goofiness of Anna Thompson and Taylor Knight. Always ready, willing and able was sound expert David Bernabo.

They eventually all performed the same pose one at a time, yelling "Me!" But the poses became strikingly different, highlighting their individuality.

Virtually everything unfolded at breakneck speed, punctuated by by garbled whines and screams, part and parcel of that precious agony that goes along with the creative process.

It could have become annoying were it not for the cleverly good nature of the cast, for whom apparently nothing was impossible. (Even twerking.) As theater artist Adil Mansoor put it, "Space is rich with possibility because it allows for events to happen. Space calls for action."

The emphasis on action could also have easily developed into a messy dose of chaos. But Ms. ReMalia, a relative newcomer to the Pittsburgh dance scene, kept a sense of structure throughout that made this over-the-top "Ubiquitous Mass" a choice for the top of the choreographic crop.

By the end, the sky was the limit. They doused everyone with boxes of packing peanuts -- an audacious attack, but liberating for those in the audience, who enjoyed going along for the ride.