

Element of chance gives inspiration to Liquid Loft

No two performances of Running Sushi are alike as audience members affect the order of scenes

BY VICTOR SWOBODA, GAZETTE DANCE CRITIC SEPTEMBER 27, 2013



Johnny Schoofs and Stephanie Cumming truly have to be in the moment when performing Running Sushi, whose sections change sequence depending on audience participation.

Photograph by: Loizenbauer

MONTREAL - Usine C continues its fall contemporary dance season on Oct. 8 with Liquid Loft, a leading avant-garde troupe from Vienna that has never appeared before in Canada.

Vienna, the city of Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert and Johann Strauss, is probably not the first European city Montrealers would associate with contemporary dance. Yet stately old Vienna is home to ImPulsTanz, one of Europe's biggest contemporary dance festivals, which, next year, marks its 30th anniversary. Vienna also harbours a big performance space and centre for dance theory called Tanzquartier, which is where Liquid Loft will present its latest creation in December.

"Vienna has changed a lot and its dance community has grown," remarked Chris Haring, Liquid Loft's choreographer and one of its founders, in a recent phone interview. "After the opening of borders to the East, many dancers came from there. Vienna became a melting point in the middle of Europe. Liquid Loft is not in the underground, but we have many underground artist friends."

On its first Canadian tour — Halifax, Calgary and Vancouver are other stops — the troupe is bringing a duet from 2008 called Running Sushi. The title refers to those Japanese restaurants where patrons pick up sushi dishes from a conveyor belt circulating past their tables. Morsels are periodically taken and new ones are added, so that no two meals are going to be alike.

This aleatory aspect of running-sushi dining is picked up in Liquid Loft's duet. Audience members are invited to choose morsels of sushi from a tray. Each piece represents a different scene in the duet, so the order of scenes depends on the order in which the sushi is chosen.

Obviously, in a work whose final piece on one night could open the show the next night, the two dancers, Stephanie Cumming and Johnny Schoofs, have to keep their wits about them. As stage performers like to say, they truly have to be in the moment.

American Merce Cunningham is credited with introducing chance into choreography in the 1950s. Since then, chance in the form of improvisation has become a part of the working method of many choreographers worldwide. Introducing the element of chance keeps performers alert, raises the status of the unexpected as an esthetic quality, and avoids the kind of performances on automatic pilot that can seep in as a result of numerous rehearsals and shows.

Although the order of Running Sushi's scenes might change, the scenes themselves are precisely choreographed, particularly in their host of mimetic gestures and use of simple props like chopsticks. At times, the gesturing aims for comic effect, but the accompanying spoken texts in English can get pretty raw. Cumming's monologue about a Japanese family, for example, enters taboo land even as she strikes poses that make an ironic commentary on her text. There's a disconnect between the gravity of her story and her attitude toward it. Audience members are left to question which aspects of the scene they are willing to accept at face value.

In a culture in which mass and social media are sending out more and more messages of all kinds, healthy skepticism is a valuable quality.

"Running Sushi works a lot with comic images existing in commercials or advertising," said Haring. "People try to orient around these images or idols. A lot of (Liquid Loft's) research goes in this direction. What do people want to see and where does it bring us?"

Advertising, Haring noted, encourages people to seek out idols like fashion models and actors to worship and emulate.

"With new media, people can now produce their own images and many people will see them. I'm sure that this has a big idol function."

As part of their method, the members of Liquid Loft — they call themselves "liquid people" — look closely at how people in different cultures move and speak. Everything that makes each individual's body unique — its articulation and rhythm — provides the characteristics that Liquid Loft tries to incorporate into its work.

As part of this research, Liquid Loft has collaborated with foreign groups as different as Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo and a Kostroma, Russia, contemporary dance troupe. Particularly fascinating was its creation of two pieces with the Jin Xing Dance Theatre in Shanghai. The pieces looked at how gender is perceived in dance and why Europeans are attracted by the exoticism of the East.

Both of these aspects are found in the remarkable figure of Jin Xing, who was a star male dancer in a Chinese army dance troupe for 16 years before undergoing a sex-change operation — among the few such operations officially sanctioned by China's government. In interviews, Jin has said that after the

sex change, she could really see both masculine and feminine sides.

Liquid Loft's Cumming did not undergo a change as dramatic as Jin's, but moving in 2001 from her native Calgary to Vienna must have entailed a measure of culture shock. As one of the founders of Liquid Loft, she is presumably still incorporating some of the shock waves into her work.

Liquid Loft performs Oct. 8 to 10 at 8 p.m. at Usine C, 1345 Lalonde Ave. Tickets cost \$30; \$27 for seniors; \$24 for those under 30. Call 514-521-4493 or visit usine-c.com.

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette