

Hedwig Dances Review

By Zac Whittenberg

for *Trailerpilot*

When I first moved to Chicago, finding a handle on [Hedwig Dances](#)' identity wasn't easy. Production values were high and the dancing was solid but, for me, the repertoire never adhered to itself. That changed last Sunday at the company's fall concert at Links Hall. A spare central duet flanked by ensemble works – one severe and one magical – made for a program that communicated a unified sense of direction and perspective. Hedwig is a vector pointed at bracing physicality matched by confident theater, a combination I enjoy greatly.



Michel Rodriguez and Jessie Gutierrez in Stampede.

Victor Alexander, imposing and intense, and the equally-strong yet lyrical Maray Gutierrez (HD's Artistic Associate) seem at first to be the central couple in Marianela Boan's *Stampede* but, as it soldiers on, its secondary characters (Alitra Cartman, Justin Deschamps, Jessie Gutierrez and Michel Rodriguez) are fleshed out to nearly the same degree. Quasi-militaristic workwear and hard lighting based on Philip Sandstrom's design create a Bob-the-Sexy-Builder *mise en scène* that construction site striping on the set's queue belts pushes just a little too far. The retractable kind that spool in and out of their posts like a tape measure, they're choreographically integrated as much as they can be, standing in for fences, blindfolds, parallel bars, traps, a boxing ring and more. As props often do, though, they fight Boan at every turn, never quite cooperating with her aim at swift game changes. I enjoyed most the moments when they were left in one place to clothesline dancers in duets, jackknife them in solos or delineate volumes into which partners were dipped headfirst as though they contained acid or dye. The ensemble can coalesce once the boundaries are gone (not quite that obviously demonstrated, but close), traversing the space as a globule briefly spitting one member toward the ceiling before collapsing into a

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puddle. The form recongeals and repeats, making another member its next peak. A triple duet with supported leaps into deep squats had slinky pliability and the performers gave their all, but *Stampede's* final image of liberation packed only half its intended punch.

Rodriguez' world premiere *Moi Aussi* takes a setup begging for clichés – a tempestuous young couple hurting so good – and reverse-debones it, exploring the model's skeleton and tossing out any bloated excess. Rodriguez (who danced as well, with Jessie Gutierrez), has a pro's knack for producing a capacious net of movements with a single gravitational center. Much of the push-me-and-I'll-push-you-back duet creates the illusion that the floor is everything but horizontal; Gutierrez and Rodriguez climb it like a sheer cliff face and slide around as though on the wet, agitated deck of a ship in storm. Klint and Einstürzende Neubauten comprise an appropriately-conflicting pair of musical environments for the two dancers to slip acrobatically past each other's bodies in: they're oil and water in a restlessly-rocking dish. The nun who catches a bully red-handed, Gutierrez drags Rodriguez across the room by his ear, but in the end they remain stock-still and smashed together, trying despite incompatibility to fuse for reasons we can't know. *Moi, Aussi* is a dense little gem about dependency and the secret world two lovers can share.

Bill Young and Colleen Thomas' *Rein, Bellow* I've talked [briefly](#) about already but I appreciated seeing it in a room that can be made completely dark. It helped its mood and images immensely, especially a triple duet with one couple each in deep red, amber and blue light and its dreamlike final pictures. In closer quarters I also saw the cast's three women touch on the "evil nurse" type, *Doppelgänger* motifs, and a nice use of *tableaux* you don't see much these days. I left Links wanting to see more from everyone involved, choreographers and dancers alike – here's hoping Hedwig Dances furthers its explorations of high energy and subtle drama into its second quarter-century.

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