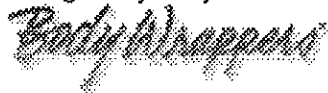


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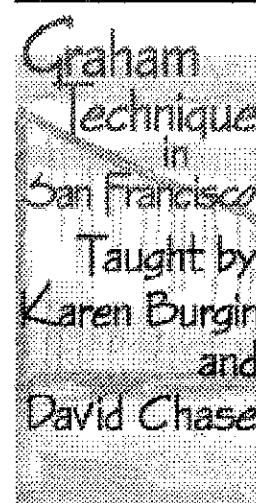
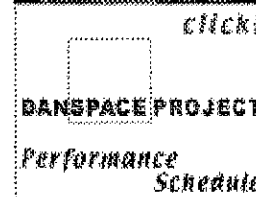
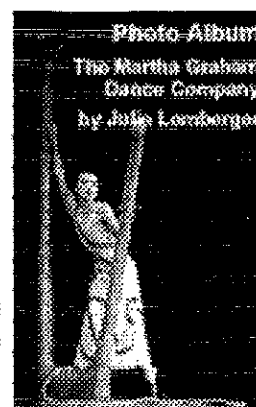
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Out of the Fog, 12-8: Bread and Circuses
Tonight on the Dance Insider! Circus Fun and "How to Die"!

By Aimee Ts'ao
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SAN FRANCISCO -- One long held view is that governments keep their populations under control (i.e. from fomenting revolutions against the ruling class) by making sure the people are not starving and are sufficiently distracted from the important political issues through sports and entertainment. Hence the term bread and circuses. If people aren't suffering too much and are merely disgruntled, then they can be placated quite easily. The arts, on the other hand, have often been the instruments to focus on real issues, both personal and societal, and, if not offering solutions, at least endeavor to raise awareness of the problems and at the same time reveal moments of beauty which can make life more palatable.

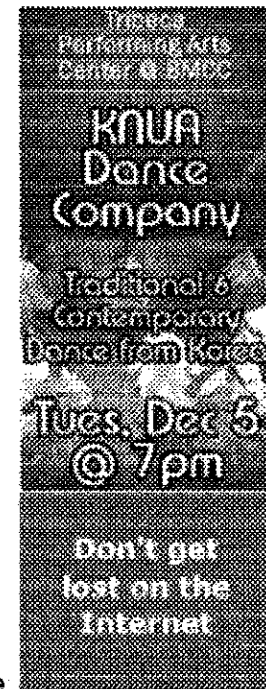
Ancient Romans found their mass entertainment at the Circus Maximus (which held 300,000 spectators), where they watched gladiators kill each other or lions disembowel Christians. With all the "progress" we've made since then, in this country many people now watch sports, Hollywood movies, MTV, and network television. The news, particularly on cable networks, can still be as gruesome as ever, but is not officially called entertainment, though at times, thanks to a long tradition of yellow journalism, the distinction is hardly clear. Personally, I would hope that those attracted to entertainment like this seek only a distraction from all that is depressing about the world situation and the human condition and not a vicarious means of experiencing the horrific and depraved thrill of inflicting harm on others.



However, there are a few wholesome forms of diversion left and in the past three weeks I took myself twice to see one of them, the circus. And between these two slices of organic multi-grain bread I sandwiched in a pretty meaty slice of art. On November 3rd it was the Moscow Circus, on the 24th I saw the Golden Dragon Acrobats -- both were presented by Cal Performances at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley -- and on the 12th, I took in Keith Hennessy's "How to Die."

What I love best about the circus is that I have no expectations beyond being astounded by physical feats that I only can dream of duplicating. If by luck I encounter more, so much the better. The ultra-slick Cirque du Soleil is not exactly my cup of tea. I prefer smaller, more on the human scale groups such as Cirque Eloize or another Cirque du Soleil spin-off, Les 7 Doigts de la Main (7 Fingers). (If you're unfamiliar with Cirque Eloize please see Christine Chen's Flash of its 2001 "Excentricus" and Angela Jones's review of last year's "Rain.") The Moscow troupe fits the bill, with only 11 members. It's quite a family affair, as the troupe includes three married couples and the son of one of the couples. The clowns, Irina and Vladimir Plugatar, are experts at luring unsuspecting audience members onto the stage and getting them to play along both literally (in a band with instruments or in the bell ringing line-up) and figuratively (as actors in a romantic triangle). Best of all, they do it almost without speaking, just miming their directions to the chosen spectators, proving that humor exists without borders and transcends languages. The rest of the cast does a great job, be it in routines of hand balancing, juggling, acrobatics or aerial work. Olga Legenda is a master of many skills both on the ground and in the air, including keeping at least 20 hula hoops going using every part of her body. But it is only at the very end that I am genuinely moved, by Sasha Streltsov in "Romancing Clouds." While suspended by tissu (fabric strips) Streltsov runs and launches himself into a soaring trajectory that travels around the stage. Against a projected backdrop of blue sky and clouds, he and his spirit fly. The look of both exhilaration and serenity on his face as he takes different acrobatic positions makes me feel like I am flying, too, and that we all can reach beyond our earthly lives and touch the heavens.

The Golden Dragon Acrobats, from Cangzhou in Hebei province of the People's Republic of China, offer a completely different experience. The 21-member company is simply jaw-dropping amazing. These performers often combine two skills into the same routine. The contortionist is brilliant enough just twisting her body into shapes that defy normal human anatomy, but then



she's doing it while balancing small pyramids of glassware on the soles of her feet, on her palms and even on her forehead. Seven energetic young men bounce and spin their way through an acrobatic number and manage to juggle multiple hats in patterns I never figure out. Nine women spin plates on sticks, three or four in each hand, as they dance, do backbends to the floor a la Graham and climb up each other into unusual balances, such as one involving one woman doing a headstand on top of another's head without using any hands. These same women later diabolo (Chinese yo-yo on a string attached to two sticks), interwoven again with acrobatic feats. The only time my heart begins to race is while watching a single man stack up six chairs, one at a time, into a 30-foot tower, stopping after adding each one to do various hand or head stands on the last addition. It is mind-boggling that anyone can even do some of these tricks. For the most part, the show is skillfully choreographed and the visual design and costumes are quite colorful. I come away astonished but not at all moved emotionally. At least I am grateful for the couple of hours of respite from having to reflect on the dismal state of the world.

In between these two circus performances, I caught Keith Hennessy's "How to Die," part of the Dance Brigade's Manifesto for Social Change at Dance Mission Theater on Sunday, November 12. Despite the depressing title and content, this collaboration with Jules Beckman and Seth Eisen is relevant to the present discussion for a number of reasons. Hennessy has been involved in both the local and international circus scenes, and currently directs Circo Zero. He has also created a significant body of politically relevant work as a modern dancer, choreographer and performance artist.

In fact, six years ago Hennessy brought Cirque Batard (Bastard Circus) to San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. This multi-layered theatrical spectacle was a collaboration between three Americans, Hennessy, Beckman and Jess Curtis, and three Europeans (sorry, but my programs are still packed away after my move last year so I can't tell you their names). The piece that was performed, "raWdoG," which is War and God backwards, set out to investigate violence and war, sex and intimacy, God and spirituality. And yes, it did incorporate many circus arts: acrobatics, juggling, suspended hoop and trapeze. Circo Zero has also mounted performances combining politics and circus.

"How to Die" has two parts, neither of them in the circus vein. The first, "SDF USA" (Ôsans domicile fixe' is French for Ôwithout fixed residence' or homeless) was commissioned by

Les Substances in Lyon, France in 2005 and the second, "American Tweaker," by Les Laboratoires d' Aubervilliers this year. Hennessy has not received any public or private funding in the U.S., despite having applied numerous times, for the past two years. He was fortunate that stalwart activist Krissy Keefer invited him to perform "How to Die" in the Manifesti-val and told him not to worry about the money, they would figure it out somehow.

"SDF USA" deals with homelessness, hopelessness and suicide. "American Tweaker" exposes meth addiction and its relation to unprotected gay sex and AIDS, all driven by a disco beat and campy drag queen costumes. Hennessy pushes every aspect of the production to the limit and beyond. He inhabits his roles in both parts with heartbreaking intensity, putting his ass on the line in every sense of the expression. Getting grants for a circus probably isn't so difficult, but for this kind of harsh critique of American culture and politics has proven to be nearly impossible. Bread and circuses indeed.

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Flash Reviews
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