



## MAGGIE'S BRAIN

Dance/theater review: "Maggie's Brain" is an unsentimental , enlightening look at mental illness and family dynamics.

By Camille Lefevre, Special to the Star Tribune

Now and then, a choreographer manifests an aspect of human experience with such emotional honesty, dramatic credibility and choreographic intent, you leave the theater moved and enlightened. Off-Leash Area's "Maggie's Brain," choreographed by co-artistic director Jennifer Ilse, is such a work. The inner world of a young schizophrenic woman, and the illness's affect on her family, is the difficult subject that Ilse (with co-director Paul Herwig) deftly handles in "Maggie's Brain." Using an economy of gesture and simple modern-dance movements, Ilse portrays Maggie's descent into psychological destabilization with an emotional restraint underscored by heartbreaking vulnerability.

Accompanying her on this harrowing journey are Maggie's five Voices. Each is a distinct personality who cajoles, harasses or demonizes Maggie as she struggles to maintain some sense of normalcy.

We first meet the mob as Maggie's happy family sits down to dinner, begins to worry when Maggie doesn't appear, then cracks under the strain of Maggie's erratic behavior. In a brilliant move, the scene is next performed in quick reverse (even the table is turned opposite of its original position). We then are shown dinner from Maggie's perspective.

As the Voices yammer at her, we suddenly understand why she yells for bread, accuses her sister, and sticks blue tape on the table. And in Maggie's eyes, her father (Herwig), mother (Diane Aldis) and sisters (Katie Kaufman, Heather Bunch) aren't expressing bewilderment and concern, but rather anger and horror.

The work is pitch-perfect and free of sentiment. But its tour de force is the tough-love duet between Maggie and her psychiatrist, played by Judith Howard with unflinching, compassionate professionalism. The success of the therapy--a mix of quiet stand-offs and body-on-body moves intertwining incisive gestures with gentle support--is revealed in a family scene of shaky reconciliation.

Herwig's simple lighting design (red, green and yellow fluorescents light up when the action is inside of Maggie's mind), and utilitarian folding tables and chairs, are the bones of this lean yet revelatory work.