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Dance review: 'Crimes and Whispers'

Review: Tango tangles with military coup politics in a new dance work, "Crimes and Whispers."

Camille Lefevre, Special To The Star Tribune

The air was stifling hot, the room saturated with lethargy. As viewers fanned themselves, the dancers moved with a limpness that signaled impending heat exhaustion. It appeared the non-air-conditioned theater might suffocate "Crimes and Whispers," even as it conjured the torpor of the show's Buenos Aires setting.

But the performers rallied. Florencia Taccetti and Jennifer Ilse, in particular, gave finely wrought performances, emotional and honest. While the 75-minute show -- co-produced by Gerry Girouard and Dancers, and Off-Leash Area -- was uneven in concept and execution, the two female leads steered the story away from melodrama, and into well-sounded depths of violence, despair and denial.

In 16 tableaux-like sections, "Crimes and Whispers" re-imagines the time after the 1976 military coup, during which thousands of citizens permanently "disappeared" at the hands of the junta, and mothers started circling the Plaza de Mayo with pictures of the disappeared. Paul Herwig's sky-blue set, painted with cartoon-like cityscapes, houses secret doors, black-curtained openings, and panels that peel away to reveal images of violence.

Violence also is conveyed through Girouard's choreography, a highly physical blend of tango, acrobatics and break-dance moves. Victims twist and cower beneath the feet and legs of the junta, who imprison their victims with horizontal one-armed balances. The mothers line up against the walls with their hands raised, as the junta pin them with wall-walking handstands.

Elbows jut, legs lunge, and shoulder stands end in break-dance "freezes." Through their movements the characters argue, insult, plead and try to persuade each other. At the work's core are Taccetti, the mother who ardently tries to get Ilse's blind citizen to see, or at least acknowledge, the missing.

Ilse performs much of the work blindfolded, which lends her torture scene with Girouard as the junta leader a wrenching, visceral quality. She often places her hand to her face, gently turning herself away from the truth. And in a friendship duet, she enfolds Taccetti in a choreography of embraces.

Herwig's Death appears throughout the piece, a worn traveler in felt-hat and sunglasses who snaps Polaroids of his victims. Even he despairs at the junta's death toll, ripping open hidden pockets of misery to reveal the secrets beneath.

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