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Off-Leash offers new dance, drama

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How do you know if you've had too much of a good thing? It's the dawning awareness that the experimentation in Off-Leash Area's "Rip, Romp & Howl" can only keep you at the edge of your seat for so long. For this show, co-directors Jennifer Ilse and Paul Herwig each have new works, taking a break from their usual joint efforts. The first half of the program at The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis has glimmers of inspiration. But the glow dims after intermission.

Herwig has a strong sense of visual drama and we encounter him enshrined within a small platform decorated with all sorts of talismanic whimsy - trophies, umbrellas, toys, Mardi Gras beads. As he performs his solo "The Knave of Knives" dressed as a mystical figure, Herwig's restrained movements are meaningful, animalistic and precise. The world he conjures up has surreal dream logic but with a chilling dark side.

"Reintegration," a collaboration from Ilse and Vanessa Voskuil, has a similarly striking set -- a "tree" constructed with cellophane and tinsel. Ilse performs her choreography solo, restlessly exploring the space and pulling on a "root" while searching for both a literal and figurative breaking point. She paws the ground in an attempt to move the unmovable -- and eventually accepts what she cannot change.

Another piece created by Herwig with Brian Evans adapts Jean Michel Basquiat's biography into a dance-theater work. It makes sense that the doomed painter who upended the 1980s art world should have his fleeting life story told through purposefully messy and tumultuous movement. Evans' choreography captures the struggles of a young man overwhelmed by fame and the glare of his own talent. Herwig haunts him as both a deathly figure and as blasé mentor/rival Andy Warhol.

Ilse's "White Pillar, Red Fabric, Empty Space" is an exploration of depression's grip, using movement that takes the six dancers into inverted positions. But the overall tone of the work is too fixed on its constant angst to reveal anything novel about a complex state of being. And Herwig's "Nine Types of Light" has a compelling central image of a ship filled with zealous missionaries but it devolves into a mélange of moments overly reliant upon masks and frantic dancing. The piece comes off as disconnected and random in its wandering ways.



Jennifer Ilse

Off-Leash Area,

RIP, ROMP & HOWL

What: New dance-theater works by Off-Leash Area's Paul Herwig and Jennifer Ilse.

When: 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat. and Mon., 7 p.m. Sun. Also 8 p.m. May 17-19. Ends May 19.

Where: The Playwrights' Center, 2301 E. Franklin Av., Mpls.

Tickets: \$15-\$20 (pay what you can Mon.), 612-724-7372, offleasharea.org

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