

CITYPAGES

Paul Herwig's Le Squat

Now playing at Off-Leash Area's Our Garage
By Quinton Skinner Wednesday, Jun 23 2010

While it's the sour grapes of fogies to say that youth is wasted on the young, there's a germ of truth in that: The young are generally terrible at understanding their actions in the big picture that comes with age. One of the consolations of growing older, after all, is the ability to look back on our stories and make greater sense of them.

Paul Herwig can no longer face accusations of spring chickenhood, and in his new one-man show he casts an eye back to the early 1980s when, as a young and presumably arty guy, he spent time living with a group of assorted nuts in a squat in Paris. He was surrounded by drinkers, artists, and those occupying various points on the scale of madness. It was, presumably, an exhilarating and sometimes terrifying way of life, of the sort that only the young can endure with enthusiasm.

But Herwig has cannily chosen to largely omit himself from this elliptical, impressionistic piece of storytelling, focusing instead on the characters he met during his six-month stay. He enters the small stage as himself and climbs a wall (literal and metaphorical) to encounter a series of empty coats that evoke powerful memories.

The first character Herwig subsequently inhabits is the primal PomPom, part of a squad of bums who inhabited the squat's ground floor. Pissing in the corner, growling at the audience, PomPom lays out his outsider's rules: no police, no drugs, no dogs. It's an evocation of human life at its basest, stripped down to the bare essentials of survival.

From there, Herwig evokes a man named Horse, who cuts pictures into strips and magically produces a collage (there is a good deal of sleight of hand throughout), then the strange Genevieve, almost an apparition, whose offer of a song leads to her bitter denunciation of the audience for failing to compensate her. By this point, frankly, you're either in or you're out.

I found myself buying in. Off-Leash Area's work oscillates between Jennifer Ilse's emphasis on the flows and stutters of movement and Herwig's strong visual fixation (I'm simplifying here, but not insultingly so). Ilse directs *Le Squat*, and it's clear that Herwig required an astute editor. We are, after all, viewing a show in a garage, albeit a fairly large one, and watching one man crash about a small, cluttered space painting on the walls and raving at us in French.

But it all works. Particularly when Herwig is performing on Off-Leash's compressed stage, his output reflects fanatical attention to detail and the poetry of synchronized sound and vision. He enters the show painting stars on a far-off sky, and each character he invokes leaves behind an artifact on the increasingly cluttered stage. Original ambient music threads scenes together before a final affirmative send-off. The stage is effectively his consciousness, a riot of memory and a search for meaning. It certainly doesn't hurt that it all looks really cool.

Along the way we have a character discoursing on Duchamp while splattering a sex doll with paint, as well as stylized crucified entrails representing another's vision of himself. Before we're done, French Minister of Culture Jack Lang makes an appearance—as a puppet vomiting loose change in a show of support for all the crazies.

Le Squat is a riot, then, in at least a couple senses of the word. But there is a method to Herwig's madness. This is a look back at youthful abandon free of narcissism, entranced with the characters met on a youthful road that have come to represent unrestrained freedom, a concept joyous but double-edged when seen through the lens of maturity. Those of us with entrenched roots indeed remember wanting to soar into infinity.