

Dance review: Off-Leash Area

- Article by: CAROLINE PALMER , Special to the Star Tribune
- Updated: June 22, 2013 - 1:17 PM

Revival of 2005 dance theater production still delights.

What's mostly black and white and beloved all over? It's "Psst!" Off-Leash Area's 2005 Ivey award-winning dance theatre production, back on stage this weekend at the Cowles Center. The evening-length piece, which opened Friday night, draws its far-reaching inspiration from Norwegian graphic novelist JASON, Betty Boop cartoons and Fritz Lang's iconic silent film "Metropolis." It's an imaginative tour de force that delves into the lightness — and darkness — of existence.

This bittersweet love story created by Off-Leash Area co-artistic directors Paul Herwig and Jennifer Ilse follows a winding emotional path from hilarious to heartbreaking, relying only on movement and music to guide the way. The cast wears black and white masks designed and built by Herwig that summon up the solemn dog, cat, monkey and bird faces among JASON's characters. In "Psst!" they inhabit a bleak work-a-day world run by ruthless factory thugs and haunted by the dapper bicycle-riding specter of Death (Jim Lieberthal in a skull mask). His presence is chilling for its precision, loneliness and slowly evolving calculation.

The show centers around The Janitor (Herwig) and The Secretary (Ilse). Ilse's choreography affectionately highlights their fidgety bashfulness — they belong together just like the two halves of the bright red apple they share. But Death has other plans and the two find themselves in a zany underworld inhabited by fiercely grinning demonic figures dedicated to pursuing our heroes with the decidedly awkward gaits of the eternally damned.

Much of the fun in watching "Psst!" comes from the various ingenious ways Herwig uses sets and props to further the story. They are often minimal (furthering the two-tone theme) and yet altogether charming, particularly when Herwig's Janitor tumbles down into Death's lair with a crank-and-pulley screen of hand-painted images depicting his dangerous journey. And Mark Doty's music composition and audio design proves a perfect match for the array of Ilse's movement choices (from the dignified to the depraved) as well as the generally antic goings-on.

A quibble : The work feels overly drawn out in some scenes, particularly a madcap chase. But overall it's an original gem, one tinted with all of the hilarity and sadness of an everyday life upended by a series of most unusual events. The 2005 kudos for "Psst!" was well earned. It's terrific to see it in revival and still delighting audiences of all ages.

Caroline Palmer writes about dance.