

## Off-Leash Area dancers offer poignant meditation on grief

Review: Off-Leash Area's show illustrates cyclical stages of loss.

By **Caroline Palmer** Special to the Star Tribune JUNE 25, 2017 — 5:24PM

Loss is a common experience, but it plays out differently for everyone. Off-Leash Area's "Dancing on the Belly of the Beast," which premiered Friday night at the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis, offers a poignant meditation on the biggest emotional loss of all — life, specifically the rite of passage accompanying the death of a parent.

Directed and choreographed by Jennifer Ilse in collaboration with a cast of 19 dancers, the work draws upon her own experience of "adult orphanhood." Faced with a complicated array of emotions, she explored the concept in workshops and found kindred spirits in her fellow artists.

Ilse approaches her topic by quietly affirming what we all learn about grief: The path to healing is cyclical, unpredictable, long and often difficult to follow. Thus, circles are central to "Dancing on the Belly of the Beast" — the performers' journey onstage is comprised primarily of loops, slowly or quickly, leading to encounters defined by tender touch, a warm embrace, a brief meeting of the eyes.

The sound composition, played live by Craig Harris, enhances the dreamlike solemnity.

The work is premised, in part, upon the importance of caring for those left behind. This is most evident when the cast tends to the four central performers: Karla Grotting, Christine Maginnis, Ray Terrill and Ilse. They are led through a costume change, their bodies compliant and faces blank — drained of energy but receptive, or at least resigned, to the help.

We learn of their own parents' qualities, best captured by Grotting's memory of her do-it-all-with-style mother whose chipped nail polish spoke volumes. As we grow older we understand what was (often unsuccessfully) hidden away from us as children. And as we recognize similarities within ourselves, a sense of mortality takes shape. It's not a morbid realization, but can be unsettling, as Ilse shrewdly demonstrates.

Visual art plays a key role with Paul Herwig and Jesse Neumann Peterson creating a live installation design on mobile canvasses set up around the stage. Patterns, photos and symbolic objects are pasted up while painted words — regret, guilt, freedom — reveal the complexity of loss in real time, layer upon layer. Between the movement and the visuals the stages of grief are revealed. At the end Ilse says, "I'm still here." And these are defiant words.