

Momix

Opus Cactus

by Lisa Claybaugh

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Back in 1981, Pilobolus founding member Moses Pendleton broke off from the group and started his own venture, which he titled Momix. Though the new company had hints of the older company, Momix was different and wholly Pendleton. Where Pilobolus explored what the human body could do, Momix explored how the human body could form itself to look like something else, whether another animal or another dimension. Friday evening's performance of the new *Opus Cactus* very clearly presented this difference.

Opus Cactus is a multi-sectioned evening long piece inspired by the Sonoran desert and is filled with vivid imagery of the flora and fauna of that inspiring landscape. The music was eclectic ranging from Brian Eno to Australian bush music to the Swingle Singers doing Bach. The movement was classic Momix.

This is a company that has cornered the market on playing with props, and this piece had its share of fun toys including ten-foot poles, giant oscillating tear drops, fans, and mini dollies. Of course every prop served a very specific purpose, for instance, the dollies allowed the ladies lying on them to skitter around the stage seemingly on their bellies like the lizards they were trying to be in the section titled "Sidewinder." The difference between Momix and its many imitators is the use of each prop to its fullest potential. So often a dance company will take a few tentative and pathetically safe steps just to suck the audience in and then toss away the prop and do a little dance that could be like any other dance by any other company. Momix dancers turn the prop into an extension of their body, something that completely changes the way they move so they look un-human.

In some sections the prop was another person. In “Ostrich of the Imagination,” the women were perched on top of the men in such a way that, on the backlit stage, they looked like ostriches. In “Desert Blooms,” the dancers were stacked on top of each other to look like blooming saguaro cacti. The men in the company, wearing head-to-toe mottled spandex, lined themselves up and turned in a multi-legged beast crawling across the floor in “Gila Dance.”

Pendleton has an uncanny sense of how to use perspective and facing to completely change the physiology of a dancer or group of dancers into something else. He uses classic optical illusion to make three dancers look like one with six legs or to make a dancer look like she is levitating: simple yet completely effective. With another, less-adept company, that sustaining of the entire illusion through lighting, costume, and carriage of the dancers, these time-honored theatrical tricks would not be as effective, but because the audience is drawn into their world, we are more willing to suspend our disbelief, even the forever cynical former stagehand like me.

I left this performance feeling I had experienced another geography. It took me to another place. Very few dance companies have succeeded in accomplishing that most important of tasks. After all, why do we go to the theater if not for escapism? Momix is a company for whom written descriptions are not sufficient. They really must be seen to be fully appreciated. And they have such wonderful toys...

Edited by Mary Ellen Hunt.