

Expanse brings challenging, powerful dance to Edmonton

March 11, 2015 Fawnda Mithrush Arts, Dance No comments
Issue: #1011: Vigilante



Native Girl Syndrome // Marc J Chalifoux

The month of March has exploded. Pamela Tzeng helped Mile Zero Dance christen its new studio space and Sylvain Énard gave us the non-apocalypse. The Jen Mesch Dance Conspiracy is about to invade the Science Building at the U of A (again), while Shumka throws a 30th-anniversary celebration of its *Hopak* with multiple generations of dancers.

And then there's that movement arts festival (which dropped "movement arts" from its title) that celebrates the body and all the things it can do.

Exhausted as we could be, this year's lineup for the Expanse Festival is exciting, and that's not because—full disclosure—your truly and *Vue* arts editor Paul Blinov will be covering the whole thing on our podcast on contemporary dance (it's called *I Don't Get It*).

Curated jointly by Azimuth Theatre and the Good Women Dance Collective, the Expanse 2015 program is a cross-country *mélange* of works that range from cerebral and cybernetic to controversial and concerning.

Along with showcases on homegrown artists and a spotlight on Nancy McAlear's *The Contract*, there's also East meets West with Kate Stashko's *The Matryoshka Series* and Montréal's Parts+Labour_Danse's *La Chute*. The Lobbyists will entertain throughout, and two cabarets will spout surprise late-night performances.

On the featured artist docket, Winnipeg's Freya Björg Olafson and Montréal's Lara Kramer bring two distinct experiences to the stage. While Olafson's *HYPER_* offers a multi-dimensional, multi-formatted play on perceptions of virtual and real bodies (3D glasses provided at the venue!), Kramer's *Native Girl Syndrome* presents a visceral and disconcerting portrait of lives addled by addiction, alienation and despair.

"I came across the title a number of years ago," Kramer says. "I think it was a teacher describing a child leaving the residential schools and the statement was 'this girl, she will fall victim to native girl syndrome.' It just stood out for me, because basically it was my grandmother."

Kramer met her grandmother only once at age nine, but adds that the shadow she cast stretched wide.

"What I knew about her was just the surface level of who she was. How did my grandmother lose 12 children [to] the system?" she asks. "Early on, this piece was so much about making sense of my family history."

Native Girl Syndrome, Kramer admits, is a challenging, dark piece of work. Two dancers, Angie Cheng and Karina Iraola, portray women doomed by circumstance; they wander as ghosts in an urban wasteland, disoriented and prone to self-harm.

"The piece has been received well, and not so well sometimes; it's definitely not the kind of work that makes you leave the theatre smiling," Kramer says. "I think it's work that you can sit with."

She often used film as a reference to develop the full articulation of what she wanted to say.

"In film we allow ourselves to see vivid and violent images, and it's a given," she says. "Performing arts is for sure a different experience, but I felt that maybe this is the time to be pushing those boundaries."

Native Girl Syndrome, which played in Edmonton for one showing in 2013 during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was awarded a prize for Audacity at the 2014 OFFTA Festival of Live Arts in Montréal.

Kramer notes that because the award was given *en français*, it was tough to determine what the jury meant, but she knew that it was given by her peers wanting to acknowledge her tenacity and bravery in the work.

"It's hard to be in a place of feeling courageous and just telling your story, to give a voice to what's stirring inside of you," she says. "The characters in the work are a reflection of the result of cultural genocide."

Sure, she says, there might be a "gentler" way to tell the story, but that's not what she set out to do.

Until Sun, Mar 15

ATB Financial Arts Barns, \$16.50

Full schedule at expans.ca