

Oregon Arts Watch Review

Wonderheads makes its local name with “Grim and Fischer”

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Elderly Mrs. Fischer is trying to stay ahead of the law — well, to put it more precisely, the laws of nature. Her number is up. Her time has come. Her ticker is twitching. And Death, in the person of the gray-faced Mr. Grim, is trying to serve her papers. “Grim & Fischer,” then, is the story of an old woman literally dancing with death. Sounds pretty maudlin, huh? And maybe even...mundane? Well, no, actually; it’s thoroughly captivating—and despite its inevitable conclusion, full of little surprises along the way. With layers of laughter, suspense, and sympathy, Wonderheads manages to lighten the topic without trivializing it. The audience roots for Wonderheads’ little old lady with the kind of fervor normally reserved for a favorite sports team.

In this kind of show, wordless and winsome, it’s easy to forget how much technical acumen is at play. Kate Braidwood and Andrew Phoenix both hold MFA’s in Ensemble-Based Physical Theater from Dell’Arte International, a credential they acknowledge as “most curious.” Indeed, the venerated and ancient form of mime holds a narrow niche, complete with its own performance lexicon (for instance, performances aren’t “written” or “directed,” they’re “devised.”) They’re also the show’s mask-makers, melding cartoonish character heads with the minimalist “larval” style popular in European mime training. What’s more, this particular show incorporates no fewer than 150 sound cues (managed by Emily Windler), running the gambit from fart noises to Chopin’s Nocturne Op.9 No.2.

Wonderheads’ mask craft is superb, and it has to be. Since each character wears a fixed expression, a given face must be finely calibrated to be “read” multiple ways. Cartoons tend to emote a bit one-note; this is where the “larval” influence may be their ace. Grim, for instance, has a down-drawn mouth that can seem angry or confused—but in its nobler moments, it melts into a sophisticated somberness befitting a distinguished gentleman. His eyebrows, arched not glowering, can look

forceful, imperious, or just plain surprised. Mrs. Fischer's mouth is twisted in a perma-sneer-smile which—amazingly—can look stubborn, wry, sly or sweet. Two more highly-interpretable mugs make an appearance over the course of the show: that of a male nurse (progressive!) and a giddy little gap-toothed girl (irresistible!). The fact that the Wonderheads' duo can be credited with this perfect preparatory handiwork, brings their presentation to a whole new level.

"I'm almost certain you haven't heard of us," remarked Braidwood in her invitation, explaining that the company has been touring nonstop since its inception in 2009, racking up accolades and Best of Fest awards in Ohio, Florida, and Canada, but doing very little to promote in their hometown. This sudden challenge to local art-heads' knowledge raised interest and stakes, unleashing a slew of "Grim & Fischer" reviews, and overcoming my reluctance based on a bad memory of another masked troupe performing poorly at IFCC in the past. Ultimately waving outside acclaim in Portlanders' faces proved a shrewd move, and we've heard of them now. When it comes to masked movement in Portland, Imago have long—and deservedly—been the top Frogz. In the broader realm of physical theater, aerial collectives already abound, vaudeville variety curation already falls largely to the tireless Wanderlust Circus and Swingtime PDX, and semi-annually, Cirque du Soleil pirouettes through town, bringing clowns at the *crème* of "Dell'arte" standards. Portland's physical theater scene, therefore—like its indie rock scene, comedy scene, etc.—may already be at or over capacity to serve local demand. But generally when true excellence rears its head in any discipline, the key players will scooch over just enough to make room.

"We want the community to get to know our work," said Braidwood. We've spent so much time on the road touring that we've neglected our own hometown; we've developed great audiences all over the place...except for here," By their closing show on Saturday, however, that discrepancy seemed to have resolved; the troupe packed the IFCC and earned a standing ovation. They've also begun coordinating a show with Headwaters Theater next summer. Headwaters' territory, a crossover zone where *butoh* impresario Mizu Desierto marries madcap whimsy to *contemp-art* cred, seems a suitable next proving ground for the agile players in that the *butoh* standard—minimalist, focused habitation of character—is a fit. Thematically, though,

“G & F”’s narrative more closely aligns with tear-jerkers like Hand2Mouth’s “My Mind Is Like An Open Meadow,” and their mask craft with places like—yes, Imago, and their new space-mate Tears of Joy.

But enough about Portland Underground Clown Politics. The show itself wins on deft execution and universal theme. All we actually see is Mrs. Fischer reminiscing about her (presumably dead, presumably husband) by fawning over a music box and a camel coat. We see her evading visits from both Grim and her day nurse. We see her gazing with dread on an unopened black envelope, and eventually we see a prolonged and multi-layered confrontation between her and her would-be undertaker. Not all audience members can identify with the character’s old age, but her fear of death is universal—as is her dread of official mail, her annoyance at unwanted visitors, and her sentimental handling of lost-loved-one mementos. The story’s so simple, and in many ways gentle, that I’m tempted to recommend it for all-ages. Though the Grim mask itself may seem demonically horrifying to very young, very sensitive kids, the ultimate takeaway could prove more effective than the usual “my first gerbil” method of acclimating little ones to the idea of mortality. Emily Windler’s pre show “Ta-Da,” a fidgety little girl making adorably failed attempts at a “majic” act, definitively proves Wonderheads has some child-charming, modular festival fodder up its sleeve.

Suffice to say, heads up for more homecomings from this wonderful group.