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Joe Goode's 'Wonderboy' - joy as dance, puppetry

DANCE THEATER REVIEW

Steven Winn, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic Published 4:00 am, Monday, June 9, 2008



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The Joe Goode Performance Group performs Wonderboy, a new dance theater work that incorporates puppetry, during a dress rehearsal at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, ... [more](#)

Expect no crime-stopping stunts or feats of super-human strength from "Wonderboy." Played by a puppet, and a particularly inert one at that, the title character of Joe Goode's achingly tender new dance theater piece at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is all but paralyzed by his hypersensitized feelings. Daylight, bell sounds, a boy passing by on the street all set him off. "All I do is weep and tremble," quivers Wonderboy, in a performer's half-strangled voice miked to sound a bit like Peter Lorre's.

Just about the time you want to throttle this passive hothouse plant, who never ventures from his windowsill perch, he begins to prove more resourceful and even courageous after all. After a sly crack about being manipulated by others - the hand-and-rod-puppet shoots a look at the two dancers who are controlling him at the moment - Wonderboy opens up to his own sexual urges, his sense of shame and finally to his deepest fears.

It's terror faced head-on that finally gets him off his observer's windowsill and out into the risky wide world of real people and genuine possibilities. Bounding from the back of one crouched dancer to another, as if they were rocks in a surging river, our emboldened hero enters the exhilarating flow.

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In one witty move devised by director/choreographer Goode and director of puppetry Basil Twist, Wonderboy uses the feet of one dancer as pedals as he proudly cycles across the stage. Then, in one of those passages of innocent joy that Goode can conjure like no one else, the puppet and his flesh-and-blood counterparts are joined in a sustained, exultant dance of fluidly partnered and paralleled steps.

You could feel the delight spread through the house like a spring breeze on opening night of this world premiere. Just as Wonderboy crosses over and joins the human realm, we all join his, where dance can defeat gravity (of both kinds) and send even the most earthbound soul aloft. It's a double-sided metaphor, aptly expressed in the language of movement and music

The piece is built on a simple, even a simplistic conceit about cloistered feelings, homosexuality and an artist's desire to "frame the world." Goode's work often skates on, and over, the line of preciousness. Some of the text and several scenes - a cheerleader's taunt of the gay Wonderboy, a gender-bending solo about sexual intimidation - are problematically obvious. What makes it all work, especially in "Wonderboy's" expansive second half, is the artful fusion of dance, puppetry, music and a scenic coup of billowing white curtains.

The six Joe Goode Dance Group performers, who are also credited as co-creators, move with eloquent, guileless grace. Often working in pairs, they fold together like cunningly made origami, pull apart like stretchy taffy and lever each other up as if they were taking turns as puppeteers and lightweight puppets themselves. They're also pretty good at impersonating rocks for Wonderboy's benefit.

The music, by Carla Kihlstedt and Matthias Bossi, is beguiling in its own right and expertly molded to the action. There's tango-inflected svelteness here and pizzicato pixilation there, just as needed. Heather Basarab's lighting doesn't always hit its marks precisely, but it helps build the buoyant and sometimes raucous mood.

"Wonderboy" meanders into a superfluous explanatory coda, but ends divinely. It's a communal moment, reminiscent of the *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, drawn here in delicate strokes. When the hero makes his exit, it's done to an audience full of grinning faces gazing upward.

The 75-minute evening opens with excerpts from Goode's 1996 "Maverick Strain," a comically lyrical fantasia on Western themes. Swaggering cowboys, hard-drinking women, Reno gamblers and Vegas dancers turn up on a set of corral-style fencing. Goode, dressed in big furry chaps and a heavily fringed jacket (choice costumes by Wendy Sparks), serves as the crooning, softly whistling narrator.

Some of the scenes and dancing are fun to watch. A slowpoke flirtation between two men and two women turns gender-woozy before your eyes. The company warms to the wide-open wingspans and patient corkscrew moves of the choreography. But there's also a lot of aimless wagon-wheel spinning in these excerpts. It's hard to see, without seeing the whole, how "Maverick Strain" might hold up as a sly response to all these well-worn notions of the West.

The Joe Goode Dance Group: 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 7 p.m. Sun. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 700 Howard St., San Francisco.
Tickets: \$25-\$40. Call (415) 978-2787 or go to www.ybca.org or www.joegoode.org.

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