

C!RCA – Wunderkammer

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Brisbane based C!RCA have been performing their style of contemporary circus since 2006 to critical acclaim around the world. The 2013 season of Wunderkammer at the Malthouse Theatre is their latest show that involves, as the company profile states, "a blending of bodies, light, sound and skill". Artistic Director Yaron Lifschitz's subtle choreography enables this performance of acrobatic skill and strength to be elevated to a moving and thoughtful piece.

Wunderkammer takes its influence from cabaret, burlesque, vaudeville and, as its title suggests, a room of wonders. These wonders are presented as a series of vignettes by one or two performers interspersed with ensemble pieces that allow the seven members to, at times chaotically, fill the stage. A performance comprising purely of a series of acrobatic set-pieces within a proscenium would soon tire a theatre audience and so it is fortunate that Lifschitz and the ensemble have created such a strong work that encompasses physical and emotional involvement.

The opening of the show starts with two simple solo pieces that quickly progress to the entire ensemble being on-stage with each member performing as their own character with or without props. This busy scene is frustrating only in that it prevents the audience from concentrating for any length of time on a given performer but this is soon forgotten as several two-hander pieces follow. Taking its cues from cabaret these pieces are full of innuendo, sassy expressions and a musical score as diverse as 50s rock, 60s exotica and 90s techno that all help to create the narrative.

The strength and ability of the performers is undoubtedly one of the shows common accolades but it is the frailty of the human body and the on-stage relationship between performers that ultimately has the power to draw in an audience. Several stand-out pieces focus on the tension between two performers as they move against and actively fight each other with a sometimes violent yet always balletic movement. In one piece two female performers are in constant contact with each other suggestive of the negotiation involved in any intense relationship. Their touches are at once aggressive, hurtful and caressing all while their combined silhouette flows about the stage captivating with its conflict of symmetry and asymmetry

A second piece performed by another two members also plays with the ideas of roles within a relationship in the C!RCA way of being at once harsh and beautiful. A lithe Kimberley Rossi provides the base for a muscular Nathan Boyle as he moves from one side

of the stage to the other. With contortions and flexibility Rossi manoeuvres herself so that a part of her is always present for Boyle to land feet or hands upon. This homage to an idea of one partner literally supporting another is mesmerising to watch as they allow a moment or two of pause in a particularly sculptural position while the audience audibly responds.

It is here that Wunderkammer displays its strength in adding an emotional element to an acrobatic movement. It could be argued that it is all up to the viewer to interpret the story of a dance performance but CIRCA's choreography insists on its presence. The range of their movements and the physical connection between the performers is such that reading a relationship into the performance is natural. The unspoken dialogue embodies this narrative, a typical device used in contemporary dance, when one performer offers another a counterpoint and it is impossible to avoid any idea of a relationship between them.

While feats of strength and dexterity are plentiful in Wunderkammer, it is in the quieter moments that the audience is really drawn in. The choice of accompanying music certainly plays a large part in defining the mood of a given piece but it is mainly in the style of movements expressed by the performers that allows experimentation with a deeper symbolism. This ranges from a graceful dance of lovers to cat-like playing with props and entanglement. For the majority of this show another performer serves as a prop but occasionally a more traditional circus apparatus is used.

Once the stalwart of old style circus tents, the trapeze in Wunderkammer becomes so much more under the control of Jessica Connell. Barely shifting from its position of hanging still, this trapeze is transformed into a divide between worlds. Starting with a slow piano and violin backing, Connell hangs limply and appears to struggle with the weight of her own body. This fight with the self is stunningly portrayed as she then nimbly flies up the ropes, twists and turns until collapsing again below the trapeze bar, suspended at her armpits. This pose, under a single spot, hauntingly evokes an image of someone barely keeping their head above the waterline. This strong solo performance ends with four of the ensemble members lying down before her, arms stretched up and hands waiting to provide a series of steps to allow Connell to walk down to the floor.

The finale to the show, possibly referring to Chunky Move's brilliant Tense Dave, positions a single, male performer at the centre while the rest of the ensemble interact with him one by one. His deadpan expression is maintained throughout but ends with what appears to be wonder as, using only a single hand, he holds aloft a female performer. This ending highlights the trust visible on-stage as well as the triumphant celebration of the human body that is Wunderkammer.



Fig 1. Wunderkammer as performed by CIRCA, 2013