

WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT NICHOLAS LEICHTER'S *KILLA*



“arms pumping, feet darting, hips swaying and jutting to the reliably pounding rhythms of the music...channeling the backup routines of a Michael Jackson video...**cheered wildly by the audience...Leichter knows how to party onstage.**”

The New York Times

“***Killa* is a nonstop binge of attitude, high-energy stepping, and freewheeling virtuosity.**”

The Village Voice

“***Killa* is a dance phenomenon...a celebration of the ingenuity and virtuosity of club dancing.**”

Offoffoff.com

“In an evening of jubilant dancing—part of the choreographer's crowd-pleasing debut engagement at the Joyce Theater—**Leichter proved he's got his fingers on the pop-cultural pulse and knows how to put on a spectacle to boot.**”

OUT.com



THE NEW YORKER

June 29, 2009

Goings On About Town

Dance

NICHOLAS LEICHTER DANCE

“Killa” is an apt title for Leichter’s new dance. Killing it, working it, bringing attitude and invention to bear on every beat is the piece’s aim and its pleasure-giving achievement. African movements, samba hips, the stylings of various Jacksons, and the funky chicken all find a place. Starting out in geeky corporate garb, the dancers progressively attain glamour under the influence of the unclassifiable guest artist Monstah Black, who performs his own songs perched on platform heels. “Free the Angels,” an expanded version of Leichter’s 2001 treatment of Stevie Wonder’s “Songs in the Key of Life,” completes the program. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. June 24 at 7:30, June 26 at 8, and June 28 at 2 and 7:30.)

Dance Will Save The World

Nicholas Leichter Dance kills it at the Joyce

By QUINN BATSON | JUNE 25, 2009 | Offoffoff.com

It's easy to forget that nightclub dance, especially at the gay fringe, often pulls modern and popular dance into new territory. Nicholas Leichter is a club kid at heart with the brains to wrestle club dancing onstage and make a compelling show of it. With the help of most of the original cast members in *Free the Angels* (2001) and live performances by Monstah Black and college kids from Detroit in the new piece *Killa*, Nicholas Leichter Dance made the audience love life for awhile.

Free the Angels is a joyous, offertory dance to music by Stevie Wonder. From the beautiful opening of Will Rawls holding Clare Byrne aloft, the core of the piece is couples, but this is equally a piece for the whole group, as couples shift and change fluidly and emphasize the connection of everyone onstage and off. The movement quality is quick and soft, with lovely rhythmic gaps breaking up big flowing arm movements. Smooth shoulders and hips drive most of the unison dancing, but nothing stays constant long, with quick, often surprising lifts, flying entrances and exits, and random grabs and holds that keep people connected for just that much longer, sometimes creating fluid trains of connected people, a favorite Leichter technique. Quick moves onto and off the ground, with softly controlled collapses and big pushoffs, also give the piece a gymnastic feel. Memorable moments include a solo of huge and soft movement by Will Rawls that seems to reach all corners of the space, a sweet transition duet between Daniel Clifton and Holly Handman-Lopez that goes from tender at the end of one song to active and floor-sliding with the beginning of the next, and a typical moment of broad humor from Clare Byrne, who stays just a few extra gasping breaths at the edge of the stage to remind us that much of the cast is close to forty and dancing a piece that would exhaust most 20-year-olds. Brisk lighting design by Christine Shallenberg really helps as well, often with intriguing broken-ray sidelight, and backstage klieg lights that initially blind the audience eventually swallow dancers as they melt away into the darkness between the lights to end the piece gently.

Killa is a dance phenomenon. If *Free the Angels* is almost relentlessly frenetic, *Killa* is the next step beyond, manic and inspired. Monstah Black, self-described well as Messiah of the Funk, opens the piece caught in a net in the backstage wall, lit with red and singing that "you can't win" as Leichter and dancers hand gesture the phrase in a distinctive club sign language while dancing in badass unison wearing sneaks, suits, shades and fedoras. Four college kids from Wayne State University's dance conservatory tear it up throughout with pop and sizzle, but NLD members don't cede them an inch in a protracted dance-off throw-down broken up by two strong interludes. The first is a poignant, you-can't-win-signing solo by Leichter that ends with a silent black power fist that effectively says, "ah, but we have." The second is a really rich duet between Monstah Black, singing in satyr heels, and Dawn Robinson, dancing under the influence of his voice. Think of the MC in the movie *Fifth Element* for some idea of the Monstah Black persona, with Black being less manic and more substantive. With all the sharp, fast, funny, funky acrobatics going on onstage, it is still hard to look away from Leichter when he is onstage. This is his movement, and he owns it, with extra doses of punch and flair. The whole piece is a celebration of the virtuosity and ingenuity of club dancing, and a clap-along, individual-showcase ending seals the deal.

http://www.offoffoff.com/dance/2009/nicholas_leichter_dance_killa.php

Nicholas Leichter's Beat Chamber

Monstah Black helps fuel new rhythms at Joyce Theater

By Deborah Jowitt

July 01, 2009



A binge of attitude and virtuosity: *Killa*

Photo: Andrew Smrz

Once a club kid, always a club kid. Neither a B.A. in dance nor stints in the companies of Ralph Lemon, Ronald K. Brown, and others knocked that beat, that slither, that strut, those watch-this stunts out of Nicholas Leichter's body and heart. Having choreographed pieces to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* in 2007, he told Elizabeth Zimmer in an interview about his Joyce premiere *Killa* that "I needed to get my groove back, my street cred" —not that he ever lost it— and that he wanted to acknowledge the cultural melting pot that club dancing has become.

Danced to the music of Basement Jaxx, M.I.A., Lionrock, and the dazzling live performance of Monstah Black, *Killa* is a nonstop binge of attitude, high-energy stepping, and freewheeling virtuosity. The dancers start out in suits and ties (plus hats and shades), become increasingly ruffled, and appear in camo-chic before their final forays in white outfits, but the message that *Killa* sends has less to do with financial meltdown or the Middle East wars than with the ways in which they might influence fashion. In the beginning, though, the vivid performers' toughness seems cool and assured, while later— as they heat up— they make their steps weightier, jabbed out in all directions. And in the end, crossing the stage in pairs, they're funky angels not sure they want to take off and leave this scene behind.

From the first moments— when Lauren Basco and Mathew Heggem are settling into a groove together; the music is still holding back its beat; and flamboyant lighting designer Christine Shallenberg hasn't yet ramped up the wattage— we sense an explosion in the offing. That's provided by Monstah Black. The curtain at the back opens, and there he is, up in the red-lit brick wall's niche, straining at a web of black ropes: Mr. Spider singing

to his possible prey. In front of him, Wendell Cooper, Stephanie Liapis, Basco, and Leichter lay out their taut, precise moves. They ripple their torsos, swing their hips, and deliver their gestures with a slash-and-punch clarity. Yet there's still something fiercely contained about them—an I'm-cool-and-I-know-it wariness in the angle of their heads, in their stares. When they grab their balls, they don't point that up (although some spectators giggle); it's just a passing dance step, no more important than a triumphant hoist of both arms.

Meet all eight company members as they feed into a line that travels across the stage and into the wings. Here come Heggem, Basco, Leichter, Dawn Robinson, Aaron Draper, Liapis; there goes Heggem. Laurie Taylor and Cooper join; so long, Basco. The cast also includes four intrepid young guests—Alex Martin, Bryan Strimpel, Kate Vincek, and Leandro Damasco Jr.—students Leichter met during teaching gigs at Sacramento State and Wayne State (they can rap, tap, back-flip, and do head spins). Sometimes, all 12 performers are whipping out their steps in unison, but more often, they come and go. Liapis and Draper spit and squirm out the equivalent of a rap duet in a window of light. Robinson, bundled in a shapeless white jacket, writhes as Black—now ultra-glamorous in a corselet and draped pants—prowls around her like a runway-model guru, doing little ballerina-style bourrées in his beyond-high red heels. He makes her his puppet, hexes her, and drives her offstage—probably saying, "Don't come back, girl, till you get a little *style*." (She returns later, looking sexy.) Then Black preens graciously around like he's our hostess, until a drum kicks in and launches the last three sections.

Killa is a festive display by terrifically vibrant dancers, attuned to all the African, Indian, Latino, and Middle Eastern flavors that Leichter stirs into his brew. The piece's movement palette, however, isn't quite as varied as that in his 2001 *Free the Angels* (set to two Stevie Wonder songs), which opens the program, and *Killa*'s choreography makes less use of counterpoint and recurring motifs. Even though I often wish during *Angels* that Leichter would stick with one handsome bit of movement longer before moving on, or take more generous pauses, he gives you the pleasure of seeing an intriguing passage (maybe two dancers swinging a third into the air in an exhilarating way) and then encountering it again a bit later, perhaps happening in a different spot onstage. The dancers' feet, though, almost never stop marking out the beat. I guess that's Leichter's club-kid soul.

For the Joyce performances, *Angels*' original cast (Clare Byrne, Daniel Clifton, Holly Handman-Lopez, Amy Larimer, and Will Rawls, plus Jared Kaplan, who learned the piece somewhat later) fling themselves almost ecstatically into the steps, the flying lifts, and the surprising tangles. Tall, long-limbed Rawls gives this kind of fluent-bodied, get-down dancing a dynamic richness and sensuous elegance that just about stops my heart.

OUT.com

POPNOGRAPHY

June 25, 2009

Nicholas Leichter puts on a "Killa" show

It's a wonder that Nicholas Leichter hasn't been tapped to choreograph a Broadway musical. In an evening of jubilant dancing--part of the choreographer's crowd-pleasing debut engagement at the Joyce Theater--Leichter proved he's got his fingers on the pop-cultural pulse and knows how to put on a spectacle to boot.

The night began with a reprise of 2001's "Free the Angels," set to Stevie Wonder's "Songs in the Key of Life." The more straightforward of the two pieces presented, "Free the Angels," nonetheless showcased the choreographer's signature style: soulful, kinetic, beautiful. The highlight, though, was the world premiere of "Killa," a hard-to-categorize blend of modern and club and hip-hop choreography set to contemporary music. (See a rehearsal in the video above.) The piece mixed songs by Basement Jaxx, M.I.A., and others with originals sung by guest artist Monstah Black, whose onstage hoofed persona introduced an element of mischief in the form of a devil in half-drag at a Harlem ball. Confounding yet intriguing, "Killa" was practically rapturous in its energy, and hopefully, signals only the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between two artists on the edge.

--JOE MEJIA