

**Flash Review 2, 2-18: Send in the Clowns
Cohen Mines Mask, Clown, Film and Twister**

**By Vanessa Manko
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NEW YORK -- Rachel Cohen and Company premiered three new works at WAX this past weekend. Reflecting the choreographer's training and background, the evening combined dance, mask, mime, and clown for a uniquely experimental evening of performance. It's always interesting to see something truly different being worked out on the stage. Even if some elements are still a bit rough and unpolished in these pieces, the basic framework of the idea is there: melding the world of dance with clown and mime.

"Of My Eye," the first of the premieres, experiments with merging clown exercises and dance. As dancers walk out patterns across the stage, apples poised on their heads, they squat and stand, and weave in and around each other. Holding the apples under their chins, they pass the fruit from person to person, and, as they struggle not to drop the apple, the effect is that of two people "making out." It's quite funny. Soon the apple is passed from mouth to mouth. Someone takes a passionate bite out of it. All the while the performers are cool as cucumbers, not flinching their deadpan expressions. It's as if passing apples back and forth from chin to chin or mouth to mouth were the most common of events. At one point, they lie down in one long line across the stage, rolling the apple from body to body: down the slope of raised legs, up over the pelvis and sternum, and gently passed to the next body in line.

"Flight of Fancy" -- shot on the Brooklyn waterfront with the cityscape in the background -- is a film that conjures up the bygone era of silent cinema. Two women are dressed in large hoop dresses that balloon out around them, forming tube-shaped cylindrical objects that appear to float or hover over the ground. Leighton Edmondson, the director of the film, and Cohen have had fun with these costumes, playing with the height of the dancers as they move up and down, their dresses collapsing and expanding like billowing slinkys. Something in this piece evokes tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee out for a stroll in Manhattan. A tea party is soon set out and now we've truly entered the world of the mad-hatter. The two dancers bask in the sun and pour tea into minuscule tea cups. One whips out a flask and takes a few hearty swigs, losing her balance and tipping over to the side. Each move is accentuated by the slinky-like dresses and the effect is interesting if a bit repetitive at times.

But it is in the last piece of the evening, "How Many Licks," that Cohen gets to use the full breadth of her experimentation. It is a surreal, quixotic and puzzling piece -- akin to children's book make believe with a birthday party, clowns, papier-mache masks, and pinatas set to the music of, mainly, Stravinsky, Minkus, and Prokofiev. As the dream-like piece unfolds, dancers emerge on stage in party

suits made of burlap with presents on their heads. The movement here is at times staid, yet, when the "presents" are opened to reveal the papier-mache masks, a new realm is revealed. Top-heavy from the weight of the masks, the dancers tip over and struggle to stand up and dance straight. The choreography is then shifted downward, as they lean upside down, balancing their weight on their hands. It's an awkward angle at first, but certainly gets one to look at dance from a different perspective -- from the bottom up, so to speak.

When the blindfolds emerge the fun begins. Very matter-of-factly a woman standing centerstage takes a stick to her papier-mache head, breaking the mask. Out fall several orange prescription medicine bottles to the tune of "I Think I'm Going Out of My Head." The rest of the dancers link hands and move across the stage. In party dress, their silhouettes look like paper doll cut outs. The imagery from childhood here is very imaginative and playful. This goes for the costumes made out of the all-time party game -- Twister -- as well. How clever and interesting to see women wearing the Twister mats as dresses. The players in tulle skirts and twister bikinis -- if you can imagine -- a game of Twister (quite inevitable at this point) ensues. The women even wear Twister spin-dials as fashionable hats.

"Right foot blue, left foot red," someone calls out.

Movement-wise, the most interesting section in this piece is entitled "Cha cha cha changes," -- a pun on the changes of growing up set to the cha-cha. The social dancing is polished and fun here. They've got this down, even if other sections are not quite as dynamic. But the end of "How Many Licks" is something to really experience. The cast emerges in outrageous masks; they are truly what makes this piece. To see rows of papier-mache pinata-like masks is quite surreal. And, as odd as it may seem, the dancers hit their heads and all sorts of playthings emerge -- pastel pink and blue mini-cars, a scrabble game, puzzle pieces. And thus ends this odd, at times enchanting little work.

While Cohen is obviously experimenting and carving out her own style, bridging dance, clown and mime, some parts were drawn out and over-done. Some of the performers -- Ariane Anthony, Joelle Arnusch, Pawel Cheda, Juan Carlos Gonzales, Kelly Kocinski, Monica Olsson, Molly Pearson, Sally Schuiling, Shaun Smith, Valerie Szurdak, Christopher Woodrell, and Leslie Smolen Wuebben -- were dynamic while other performances fell flat, mired down by the props perhaps. Therefore the piece lacked a kind of dynamism needed to convey its message. Yet, as Cohen continues to work in these various disciplines, it will be exciting to see what other whimsical, magical worlds she creates.