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Confronting Disability With Modern Dance

BY COREY KILGANNON

Not everyone is ready for this dance company that calls itself Gimp and its members with undeveloped or amputated limbs, and bodies beset with physical challenges.

Not everyone is ready for the way the muscular dancer throws around the tall, skinny guy with cerebral palsy like it's pro wrestling, and not modern dance.

Not everyone is ready for the production's spoken portion, which opens with that skinny guy, Lawrence Carter-Long, 42, telling the audience a joke that starts, "So, three cripples walk into a bar." And there may be strange looks when he goes on to mimic what some audience members tell the dancers after they perform.

"I thought that you were going to be weird, but it's really an opportunity, you know?" Mr. Carter-Long intones onstage. "Who would have expected this in a modern dance performance. I have to rethink this whole thing."

There is a reason the Gimp dancers present the unexpected, onstage. Even the name Gimp is a meant to be an in-your-face confrontation of common notions of disability and dance. The troupe is performing Thursday through Saturday at the Abrons Arts Center, at the Henry Street Settlement in Manhattan.

"The goal is to honor each person's really specific ways of moving, really specific, unique personalities," said Heidi Latsky, the dancer and choreographer who founded Gimp.

Rather than work around these dancers' particular limitations, she tries to find distinct abilities in their bodies and explore the artistic possibilities that can be had from these differences.

So the jaunty rhythm of Mr. Carter-Long's offbeat stride is featured. So is the vertical linearity of Catherine Long — who was born without a left arm — when she stretches to the sky with her right arm, Statue of Liberty-style. And so is the intriguing asymmetry of Lezlie Frye 29, who has one arm shorter than the other and windmills both arms while bending at the waist, up and down.

Jeremy Alliger, a producer for Gimp, says that, far from being limited by these dancers, Ms. Latsky "is like an artist who has just had new colors added to the palette."



VIDEO: 'Collision' of Dance and Disability

A New York City dance company called Gimp turns a prevailing notion of physical handicaps on its head. Then comes a leap, a pirouette, a lift...

After rehearsing the other day at a rehearsal studio in the Actors Temple on West 47th Street in Manhattan, Mr. Carter-Long sat with Ms. Latsky and her associate director, Jeffrey Freeze (the muscular dancer who tosses him around).

"This is no safe prearranged marriage of dance and disability," Mr. Carter-Long said. "This is a collision. This is two worlds coming together that ain't supposed to co-exist."

Gimp members say that dance helps them with both physical control and expression, with their bodies. But also, performing in public helps them — and the audience — address issues dealing with staring or averting the eyes when encountering physically challenged people. Onstage, they are inviting the public to stare.

The first evening of Gimp is dedicated to "Wounded Warrior Project," a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness and enlisting the public's aid for the needs of severely injured service men and women.

Ms. Latsky, who was with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane dance company, said she hopes to next work with veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.