

DANCE REVIEW

Old Story: Krazy Kat's Love Triangle

By Gia Kourlas

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It wasn't just another game of cat and mouse at the Joyce SoHo on Friday night. In "Love Letters in Ancient Brick," a performance piece conceived and directed by the Swiss visual artist Mai-Thu Perret in collaboration with Laurence Yadi, characters were plucked from a treasured comic strip and brought to life on a stage. Or that was the attempt. "Love Letters," a presentation of Performa 11 and the Swiss Institute, didn't really go there. It didn't really go anywhere.

Inspired by George Herriman's "Krazy Kat," a comic strip published in daily newspapers between 1913 and 1944, "Love Letters" took place in Ms. Perret's vision of the cartoon's setting of Coconino County, Ariz. In a way, you could forgive Ms. Perret for the dull theatricality of "Love Letters"; it was, after all, her first work for the stage. (One idea behind Performa, a biennial in its fourth iteration, is to have visual artists create performance works.) But the set, playing off the two-dimensional nature of a comic strip, looked shabby too.



Love Letters in Ancient Brick Margaux Monetti (with the director Mai-Thu Perret under the blanket) at Joyce SoHo. Julie Lemberger for The New York Times

Ms. Perret's design included a cutout of a mountain slope and a backdrop of geometric motifs like zigzags and stripes, all in black and white to evoke the comic strip. There were flashes of color; one performer, the lanky Jean-Louis Johannides, wore a prickly green cactus costume and stood stiffly with his arms bent like parts of a cactus. That got a few desperate laughs.

The story told onstage flickered between being too literal and too opaque. Naturally Herriman's love triangle was apparent: Krazy Kat loves Ignatz Mouse, who returns the affection by hurling bricks at Krazy's head. (Krazy, in naïveté, interprets this as a sign of ardor.) All the while the local policeman, Offissa Bull Pupp, acts as Krazy's protector; he's fixated on locking up Ignatz.

For the wonderful, witty Herriman, who was admired as someone who elevated the comics to art, those bizarre relationships provided a loop of endless possibilities. Yet here Ms. Perret and her collaborators — including the singer and songwriter

Tamara Barnett-Herrin and costume designer Ligia Dias — carved out a simplistic world where performers wore leotards affixed with fur (they looked like homemade Halloween costumes) and performed primitive yoga movements.

Krazy (Anja Schmidt, in black) moved with an odd, loping walk, while Ignatz (Margaux Monetti) took tiny, darting steps as she wiggled her torso. But Ms. Perret, in white, also appeared as Krazy and strangely enough turned out to be the most transfixing dancer in the cast, evoking the coy androgyny of the cat. For the most part “Love Letters” was flat — about as two-dimensional as a cartoon — making Ms. Perret’s venture nothing to write home about.

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