

Erika Shuch Stretches To Tell Macabre Tale

Rachel Howard | Special to The Chronicle | SF Chronicle | April 2004

Erika Shuch is just 29, but her raw and intuitive form of dance theater has cried out for a larger audience since she settled in San Francisco in 2000. Now with the Thursday-night opening of the Erika Shuch Performance Project's fourth full-evening work, running three weeks at Intersection for the Arts, Shuch has the platform to find a wider fan base and a show that deserves great word of mouth.

"All You Need" has an air of youthfulness, with its rollicking live music, fresh-faced performers and quirkily episodic sensibility. If the wry tone sometimes recalls the radio show "This American Life," Shuch herself claims it as a primary influence.

This is precociously mature work. In 2002, Shuch eerily captured our post-Sept. 11, 2001, reality in a wordless scene involving a stack of suitcases, a crossbow, an apple and a Johnny Cash song. *"All You Need"* does not carry the same degree of chilling urgency, but it's a high-energy, challenging and often insightful display of Shuch's gift for provocative imagery.

The inspiration is macabre. Earlier this year, Shuch came across the true story of a German cannibal, "M," who advertised on the Internet for a "well-built man for slaughter." Reportedly more than 400 people volunteered, and the leading candidate ended up in M's refrigerator – and stomach. Rowena Richie briefly plays the murderer who, when her victim pleads, "I want you to eat me," coolly replies, "I'll get some utensils."

"Sweeney Todd" redux this isn't; Shuch uses the metaphor of consumption to investigate all forms of desire. Jesse Howell and Jennifer Chien retread the "eat me" exchange as a tentative sexual proposition: "It's gonna hurt. ... It's not safe," they warn. An ensemble dance to the old standard "All of Me" takes on sinister shadings with the lines "take my lips ... take my arms." Love appears ultimately a matter of consensual pain and unsatisfied appetites as Howell roams the stage

like a rabid dog, begging, "Do you trust me?"

Shuch can turn the mood of a scene like throwing a light switch. When the ensemble sings in angelic harmony, it's as stirring as a Baptist hymn. A few moments later, the atmosphere is as edgy as the power tools buzzing in the background while Melanie Elms embraces, then body-slams, the poet/actress Victoria McNichol Kelly (who also contributes a poem to the work). But the imagery is more tightly constrained than in Shuch's previous efforts, and one wishes she would have given her imagination the usual free rein.

More impressive than the development of the theme is the multidisciplinary form Shuch is steadily forging. Her five singer-actor-dancers are somehow superbly ordinary; the music, sung by virtuoso Dwayne Calizo, is fully integrated; and Sean Riley's clever set and lighting and Ishan Vernallis' video never seem like window dressing. The obvious comparison is to the veteran Joe Goode, but he is different altogether, posturing where Shuch is pedestrian, polished where she is ragged. Goode tends to deal in characters; Shuch may be more purely image-driven. The point is that Goode built his own visual logic. Shuch is rapidly doing the same, and the pictures in her head are all her own.

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