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'Comme Toujours Here I Stand': A performance about training a lens on mortality by Chris Jones



Hot on the heels of the brilliant “Empire (Art & Politics)” by the European group Superamas comes another fascinating Museum of Contemporary Art presentation about the intersection of the mechanics of artistry and the anguish of real lives.

Presented in collaboration with the ongoing Chicago Humanities Festival and here through Sunday, “Comme Toujours Here I Stand” is the work of the New York-based Big Dance Theatre, an interdisciplinary group headed by Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar. This 2009 piece, directed by Parson and Lazar and choreographed by Parson, is a deconstruction of “Cleo From 5 to 7,” the gloomy French New Wave film released in 1962 by Agnes Varda (and featuring cameos from both Jean-Luc Godard and Michel Legrand).

The film's existentially potent structure is simple. We meet a Parisian pop star of modest talents who awaits the news of whether or not she has cancer.

We are focused on the chronological period after the onset of the fear — and the consequent sudden realization of mortality. Adrift in moody Paris, Cleo has no idea what to do with this slot of time before she gets her answer. Who would?

Believe a fortune teller? Escape into love? Shop? Wander aimless as a cloud?

Big Dance hardly just stages the film (look to Broadway for disastrous examples of that). Instead, the group has created a precisely structured interdisciplinary piece that draws from theater, dance, and archival and live-shot film that not only amplifies the human theme, but that deals just as explicitly with the source material itself.

In other words, “Comme Toujours Here I Stand,” which also is the name of an appealingly original song by Robyn Hitchcock (gorgeously sung here by Chris Giarmo), isn't so much about Cleo but about the filming of Cleo. Film, after all, conveys an inapt kind of permanence on a moment that actually is all about a sudden sense of impermanence.

And that's where the name of the group comes in. Big Dance Theatre: Impermanence Central.

And thus we see a fusion of re-created scenes from the actual movie, cut up and scrambled to ensure that the physics of their creation is foregrounded as much as the story they are telling.

It's a precisely detailed and frequently beguiling swirl of backstage labor, studio gossip (one of the performers, deliciously played by Kourtney Rutherford, not only has a complex relationship with the star but is constantly on the phone to her jealous stateside boyfriend), cold professionalism and palpable fear and disruption. Those disruptions include some muscular choreographic eruptions — keeping us on the edge between creativity and mechanics.

You might question whether these 70 minutes of constant motion and meta-exploration still really allow us to become emotionally involved with the central character, played by Molly Hickok, or even give Hickok enough time, space and focus for a credible journey of personal realization. Which is, after all, the point, of the source film.

That is bothersome, I think, but also not the real point of what is being attempted in a live show not so much obsessed with the fear of death, but with how that fear gets exhibited.