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THEATRE

by David King

Moving out of the margins

Calgary's Balancing Acts festival provides a showcase for disabled artists

Preview

BALANCING ACTS: CALGARY'S THIRD ANNUAL DISABILITY ARTS FESTIVAL

Stage Left Productions

Runs December 2 to 6

Big Secret Theatre (Epcor Centre)

Balancing Acts: Calgary's Third Annual Disability Arts Festival may be part of a growing international network of events that showcase the work of disabled artists – including Toronto's Abilities and Vancouver's Kickstart fests – but most importantly, it gives credence to a culture still loaded with misconceptions.

A desire to correct those false impressions has fuelled Michele Decottignies's dedication to the festival since its inception and her ongoing drama instruction over the years.

"I think we often have this tragic model of the disabled as 'oh poor them' or the tragic hero, or the idea that they are somehow living a life despite this disability," says Decottignies, artistic director of Stage Left Productions, which produces the festival with the help of One Yellow Rabbit.

The festival's name could certainly apply to Decottignies herself, as she juggles this year's increase in artist participation to nearly 100 creative souls from Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto.

"There are a lot more people who want to be involved in the bigger nights this year, so we thought we'd make it a bigger program," says Decottignies.

Presented in One Yellow Rabbit's Big Secret Theatre, Balancing Acts boasts a series of live productions, film screenings, workshops and a panel discussion packed into five eventful days.

This year's festival maintains its interdisciplinary focus with shows featuring dance, theatre, visual art and music. Performance highlights include Vancouver's Absolut Theatre Company with *Spiraling Within*, a multimedia and movement-based performance on the state of psychosis. Celebrated Toronto dancer Spirit Synott will perform her wheelchair-ballet solo *Moments*, while Vancouver writer and actor Victoria Maxwell presents her candid and altruistic one-woman show on psychiatric illness, *Crazy For Life*.

"All of the performances have something significant to say about disability and what it's like to be disabled, but it's the artist defining it," says Decottignies.

As usual, Stage Left has added a couple of cabarets to the mix, along with its own main-stage production, *Mercy Killing or Murder: The Tracy Latimer Story*. The play takes the view-point of the disabled child – the voice we couldn't hear during the murder trial of her father Robert Latimer, whose minimum sentence for killing his daughter makes him eligible for parole soon.

"Obviously it's about human rights and the rights for the disabled to live," says Decottignies. "But it's also sort of a mockumentary, poking fun at propaganda and the use of media to twist and distort images of disabled people."

Along with the live shows, the popular Picture This festival of films and videos will offer a pair of preview screenings. The series features work about, dedicated to and/or created by those with disabilities. The complete festival runs in February at the University of Calgary. Decottignies says Picture This has already provided an unlimited freedom of expression for its creators, as well as exposure around the world in new media festivals.

For those looking for behind-the-scenes activities, Balancing Act's Brave New Work program is a good way to examine both the creation process and disability culture a little further. The all-ages offerings include a fine-arts gallery, a workshop in drumming and dance, Stage Left's drama class production *Birds of a Feather*, and demonstrations of the Calgary Cerebral Palsy Association's Rhythmic Dance Therapy program.

Stage Left and One Yellow Rabbit have been working to keep Balancing Acts tickets accessible for all. This year, the festival opens with a pay-what-you-can preview night on Tuesday, December 2, and there is also a program for ticket donations so the festival can provide admission to those who can't afford it.

This year's programming is not the only area of expansion for Stage Left. The group is also making an effort to broaden the definition of disability, so expect to see more than just physical disability in its productions.

"We're making an effort to show a broad range – mental or chronic illness, physical, sensory or developmental disabilities – anything that puts you on the margins or changes your perception of yourself," says Decottignies.

If all goes well for Stage Left, Balancing Acts could become a strong magnet for visiting international productions. Decottignies is already working on it, networking with festivals in Australia and England for next year's programming and fund-raising to bring in visiting instructors like Theatre of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal.

Along with her goals of expanding the length of the festival and increasing the involvement of other local theatre companies, Decottignies wants to make people think less about "disability" and more about "disability culture."

"It's a representation of a life experience, infused by this experience of having a disability," she says. And inherent in that is a social movement, she adds. "What we need to do now is move all those margins into the middle."

For schedule and ticket information, call One Yellow Rabbit at 264-3224 or Stage Left Productions at 242-3108.

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