

Review: Mythical deer instigate change in a multimedia dance work

Off-Leash Area weaves together poetry, puppetry, projection and movement for a visceral tale.

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From left, Jennifer Ilse, Christine Maginnis, and Jesse Schmitz-Boyd form a deer standing at alert attention in Off-Leash Area's "The Oldest Deer — the Longest Path — the Highest Bough." Text by poet Athena Kildegaard is incorporated into Paul Herwig's projections, while Jim Lieberthal dances in the background. (Bill Cameron)

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Off-Leash Area wove together a poem of visual, spoken and movement language in its fantastical meditation on transformation at the University of Minnesota's Barbara Barker Center for Dance on Friday and Saturday.

The dance piece, "The Oldest Deer — the Longest Path — the Highest Bough," incorporated puppetry, spoken and projected text by Minnesota poet Athena Kildegaard, and a star-adorned set and projections by Off-Leash Area's co-director Paul Herwig, who co-created the work with director and choreographer Jennifer Ilse.

The movement began as seven dancers emerged in slow motion into what seemed to be a forest at twilight, with sparse tree branches set up around the stage. The cast featured veteran dancers like Christine Maginnis, who has for decades transfixed Twin Cities audiences with her nimble grace, as well as Jim Lieberthal and Julie Warder. Among the younger dancers, Lexi Samara, who uses a walker, brought a fiercely focused energy.

Herwig also performed in the piece, wearing a large deer head and two long sticks that protruded forward from his body.

Accompanying the movement, Reid Kruger's music and sound design mixed an ethereal mood with a techno beat. The score also incorporated recordings of choral music by Linda Kachelmeier, sung by See Change Treble Choir.



From left, Christine Maginnis, Lexi Samara, Jennifer Ilse and Jesse Schmitz-Boyd perform in "The Oldest Deer — The Longest Path — The Highest Bough" at University of Minnesota's Barbara Barker Center for Dance. (Bill Cameron)

Dancers Jesse Schmitz-Boyd, Maginnis and Ilse performed a lovely trio in the work, transforming from human to animal form when Schmitz-Boyd took up a deer head from the floor and operated it in a way that it was both mask and puppet. Rather than

wearing the deer head on his face, Schmitz-Boyd manipulated its movements while Maginnis and Ilse became a part of the same creature, moving together as the deer. At times, they'd switch who held the deer's head, while the other two fell behind creating its body.

The trio of dancers moved seamlessly together, and emitted a bewitching presence. Kildegaard's striking text bore a message that resonated to our world, even in its otherworldly setting. The words painted an unsettling picture, one filled with dangers and destruction — where diseases were brought by enemies, and the moon was filled with blood. Her language evoked imagery of ligaments and tendons in its encouragement to the humans to twist into new forms.