

Minnesota PLAYLIST

Gadu performed Fukushima at the Right Here Showcase last weekend.

Mid-career artists and the Right Here Showcase

by [Alan M. Berks](#) • Nov. 21



I am not a critic. I need you to know that up front. I am not a critic. It's not that I'm afraid of giving my opinions. Where I grew up, having an opinion and saying it out loud—testing it as though it were a hypothesis coming in contact with results in the real world—is how people learn. As in, *O, now that you say that, I realize that I had a stupid opinion. Back to the drawing board with my thoughts.* So, clearly, it's also not that I mind if you disagree with me. Again, maybe because of my upbringing, disagreeing with me simply proves you have a pulse. You are not me. I am not you. The expectation that we had the same experience in five minutes of performance, let alone a full-length evening, is ludicrous.

No, I need you to know that I'm not a critic simply because most of the audience for this website remains performing artists (for now), and I can't have you talking

to me the way that most of us talk to most critics—i.e. checking our words, trying to work the refs in the most subtle ways possible, unsure if the conversation we're having in the lobby is "on the record" or off, or just deep background, or what. I think all of my Minnesota friends work in the theater. Being a critic would be very bad for my personal relationships. I don't like the power dynamic, and I can't stand the staring.

However, our regular critic Marya Hornbacher's ceiling caved in last week—this is literally true, not a metaphor—so she couldn't cover the first weekend of the "[Right Here Showcase](#)" in the Tek Box at the Cowles Center. Because I personally think that this showcase is a significant addition to performing arts ecosystem, I donned some critic attire to take her place. What you get in the following is a kind of artist-response/critical consideration presented with the best intentions.

I saw two shows at the Right Here Showcase last Saturday evening, Deborah Jinza Thayer's *Diana Takes a Swim* and a piece from Gadu called *Fu-Ku-Shi-Ma* one of which I didn't enjoy and one of which I enjoyed. Both pieces completed their runs last weekend (a flaw in the showcase's scheduling design?), but there are 3 more pieces to see this weekend from Rosy Simas, Vanessa Voskuil, and Kym Longhi. Before I talk a little more in depth about the pieces I did see, I want to explore what this "Right Here Showcase" is. The upshot is that no matter how I felt about any individual piece, as with the Fringe Festival, I really think you should [go check out a show](#) this weekend.

What is the Right Here Showcase?

The brainchild/lovechild of Off-Leash Area's co-Artistic Director Paul Herwig, Right Here is a Fringe Festival-style presentation of mid-career Minnesota-based artists, i.e. 60 minute performances, more than one per night, affordable tickets (\$10-25)—but, unlike the fringe festival, it's a consciously-curated experience to focus the spotlight on some of Minnesota's amazing, and likely underappreciated, mid-career artists.

Why is this important? Well, as a critic—or a person—I don't pretend to be objective, and I happen to agree with Paul that the mid-career Minnesota artist is a neglected sub-species of the Minnesota artist (full disclosure: maybe I happen to be one). Many grant programs and institutional support initiatives (i.e. money and attention) can be found for the emerging voices. And if you're diligent enough to still have a voice in the arts in your 60s, then you might qualify for a Lifetime Achievement Award. But very little earmarked money and attention is devoted to the mid-career artist who has been practicing long enough to know their own voice and yet, like all good artists, is still experimenting and challenging their assumptions.

Because, in theory, mid-career artists are incorporated into the institutions of our ecosystem. By the time they reach mid-career, they're supposed to be the people who help the whole system continue to operate. For reasons that could take up another essay, however, that is not what happens—especially for more distinct and independent artists. Mid-career administrators can find stable homes in established institutions as they mature, and have a greater influence on those institutions as they work, but mid-career artists, if they find and accept work at established institutions at all are generally asked to apply their skills in service to the institution's leaders—people who are probably about to get that Lifetime Achievement Award for something. And, anyway—when it comes to artists and institutions these days—the artists' work is generally freelance and "at will," meaning sporadic, unstable, unreliable—and therefore without much influence on the institution.

I could go on. OK, I think I will: In theory too, the Fringe Festival is also a place where mid-career artists can bring their developed artistic voice to the public—and in so many ways this is still undeniably true—but in practice the festival also cultivates the vibe of a 22 year old who is maybe more interested in the free wine at the gallery opening than the art on the wall. Though you can see a lot of amazing artistry, the attention is generally focused on the companies doing something super-entertainingly accessible (generally meaning accessibly funny) with pop culture. I'm not actually criticizing—at least I don't mean it as criticism. I also love a good Shakespeare mash-up—and if anyone tries to change the uncurated nature of the Fringe, I will kill them. I'm just sharing my observations and opinions. See above re: having a pulse.

So, a festival that focuses the attention entirely on the artistry of experienced mid-career artists is totally worthwhile, I think. Go check out Rosy, Vanessa, and/or Kym this weekend. As we say about the fringe, the shows are short so if you don't like one.

Also, from what I saw on Saturday night, the Right Here Showcase has a lot of potential to fulfill its mission. The fact that there was fairly sizable audience for some very very challenging work is also encouraging.

But what about the shows?

Let me start with what I liked most: Gadu's piece had stunning visuals and an intense focus that put a anxious but exciting squeeze on my heart and then gracefully let go. There was a noticeably satisfied exhale from the audience at the end. Gadu's performance background is in Butoh, a tradition I don't know much about, but I'm told that it has something to do with pace and where weight is distributed in a performer. I suspect this training then was directly responsible for the effect of the imagery—he or his two collaborators (Masanari Kawahara, Dustin Maxwell) allowing you plenty of time to take in the odd position their body was poised in and the surprisingly effective connotations of that imagery. The final image—Gadu standing along onstage, covered in mud, mud dripping off him into a large pool on stage, basically naked, holding a doll in his arms, looking stunned—struck me as a universally compelling and tragic image of the human in the face of nature's power to destroy.

Here's one thing that I say mid-career artists do better than emerging artists. They go there completely. They know how to trust themselves. And they can make shocking stage devices serve their own artistic voice rather than simply shock. They don't just take a stab at physical vulnerability or tragic emotional activity, they journey all the way into them, unafraid. It's strange for me to realize how rarely I see an artist willingly take that much time to simply walk across a stage—and how much of this show was just stillness—or put the focus on the human body so squarely without making it about nudity itself. (The fact that all three men's private parts were covered by only a tiny cup, in combination with the deliberate and odd ways they moved their muscles, simply made the vulnerability of their human flesh and bones more noticeable.)

I should say that I didn't read the program before the show started—but not because I think art should stand alone. Here's another digression that isn't a digression: Nothing stands alone. Everything is understood as a result of our cultural context, whether it's avant-garde art or 30 second television commercials. If you have less experience with art than commercials, you're going to need some help getting into it. It is actually silly for artists to insist that their work should work outside of context. (An opinion again! I can't stop! Tell me how I'm wrong!)

Still, I learned this about myself while I was pretending to be a critic. I don't want to activate the intellectual side of my brain too early in my artistic experiences. For me, reading about the subject in words on paper puts me in the wrong mood. I'm comfortable not intellectually understanding what I'm watching as long as I *feel* it is communicating clearly with me. Confusion can be a feeling. Boredom too can be a feeling. Calmness. Agitation. Sadness. Hope. All of these things might come off the stage with clarity and crawl under my skin (something I feel is much more likely to happen at live performance than movies or television). Afterward, I'll use my intellect only to find words to explain what I felt was my experience. (Is this what all critics do?)

In relation to Gadu's show, once I looked at the program, I actually worried whether it all was *too* clear. The subject is the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011—that most of us remember as the disaster that caused the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown. The piece begins with three land masses slowly coming to together (yes, it does, which is surprisingly clear whether you read the program or not), followed by the performers bouncing around the stage (as though in an earthquake), followed by them being overwhelmed by water, followed by the aftermath. Once I knew the subject, I could see how literal each scene had been. Still, the precision and focus with which Gadu and performers present it was a singular vision, and the imagery that they created together was emotionally full.

With Deborah Jinza Thayer's *Diana Takes a Swim*, however, I did not feel a connection. I did not "understand," un-intellectually or intellectually, what was happening while I was watching. The costume designer deserves a lot of credit for her stunning dresses, which revealed and concealed the dancer's backs and legs in fascinating ways, and the long long train of the dresses which were used in cool, clever ways throughout show. The composer mixed nature sounds with consciously artificial sounds with occasional snippets of lush music in ways that impressed me.

But, I couldn't get a handle on all of it together. The program, which I looked at later, explained that the piece was an exploration of the female collective unconscious, and in retrospect I can sort of see that. But, it is such a large subject matter and, for some reason, unfortunately, I didn't feel much while I was watching. There were nice moments from both the solo performance Thayer danced in the first half—though it was a little too slow for me—and the strong, struggling, grasping, gurgling, committed performances of the four dancers in the second half (Margaret Johnson, Genevieve Muench, Sharon Picasso, and Roxane Wallace), but I felt like it was all so much, so comprehensively about maybe everything, that very little of anything reached me in my seat.

Ah, but here is another advantage of the mid-career showcase. I am happy that I can feel confident in the idea Deborah Jinza Thayer knows what she is doing, and so I can confidently say that even though I may not be into what she did, someone else may be equally and oppositely enthralled. (Is this the part where, as a critic, I wonder whether a female writer would have connected better to a show about the female collective unconscious? If true, would that be a good thing?) With emerging artists, we can't really tell whether *we* just didn't get the work or whether there wasn't really anything there to get. We feel a sense of potential and also uncertainty. With mid-career artists, we can know. (And we can judge.) It's a nice feeling, whether we judge the work positively or negatively. (Plus, as an artist rather than a critic, I want to think about that dress and that score some more.)

In conclusion

By calling this showcase Right Here, Paul has invited a comparison to the Walker's Out There series, which brings to Minnesota some of the craziest performance work they can find from all over the world. As I said, I am completely in support of pointing out that we have our own incredible, boundary-pushing, strong-voiced mid-career artists right here in Minnesota who are willing to go as far "out there" as any artists in the world.

That said, I also want to encourage *any* local artist over 30—self-described as experimental or not—to keep an eye out for next year's application. In addition to the fact that, unlike the Fringe Festival, the Right Here Showcase actually offers some development money (something that mid-career artists need a little more since mid-career may also mean "entrenched in the day job that I didn't intend to make a career"), but also because this is a festival that is still in the process of defining itself. You, visionary middle-aged person, should see what you can help make it, both as an audience and an artist.

It's a showcase that Paul hopes to make annual, and—-at least from the first two shows that I witnessed—-there is no question that the talent has really been Right Here all along.