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Feet To The Fire

Tahni Holt & her Monster Squad crew take dance past the fire breaks.

By Kelly Clarke

“When I told them I was a dancer, they thought I meant stripper,” says Portland choreographer Tahni Holt. She’s talking about her former workmates: a six man, Molalla-based firefighter crew. Holt fought wildfires, dug trenches and suffered through KUPL 98.7 New Country favorites alongside these men for two summers. Her partners, a hard-worn group of small-towners, were more accustomed to rural Molalla’s Buckeroo rodeo fest than Portland’s burgeoning modern-dance movement. But now they have a different job: playing muse to Holt’s company Monster Squad’s new work, *18 watchout situations*.

Named for the pocket-sized list of 18 cautionary tips the Oregon Department of Forestry passes out to its Wildland Firefighters each year, Holt’s work recycles those survival situations with a barrier-crunching mixture of open duets, trios and group work. The tableaux shift in meaning, from Holt’s experience as a firefighter to her small-town culture shock.

Though the adrenalin rush of firefighting was a natural for the Portland native, Holt struggled to categorize the camaraderie she felt with her engine partner, a “sexist, small-town good ol’ boy,” that galvanizes the non-narrative piece. “Here is someone who is what I have fought against my whole life,” she says. “But I knew he would save my life, and I would do the same for him.”

That improbable bond comes off well in the piece through the symbiotic mind-meld of a cadre of dancers (Holt, Daniel Addy, Tracy Broyles, Jenn Gierada, Dawn Joella Jackson and Noelle Stiles) who have worked together for more than three years. In *18 watchout situations*, they operate as individuals who alternately support and force one another, constantly reevaluating the importance of the bodies around them with sparking moments of machismo, tenderness and wit.

Lit only by a stark red square, the work’s lone design element, Holt’s bodies act as natural forces as well – barriers, spans, chasms. “I’m trying to bridge two worlds that I experiences,” she explains. Holt’s view of the small Oregon town (pop. 5,647) will face its toughest critics this weekend, when a number of her former workmates will be on hand for the Conduit performance. “That’s the thing I’m most nervous about,” she confesses. “Because this is their world, and this work is my interpretation of it.”

By balancing the inherent sentimentality of the venture with rapidly maturing choreographic chops, Holt has succeeded in turning “Tahni’s Firefighting Summers” into a terse parable of spaces of safety and danger – and the unlikely partners we trust to save us from both.