

MAG ZINE DANCE

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Puppy-Dog Tales Gregg Bielemeier Dance

Reviewed by **Martha Ullman West**

Gregg Bielemeier is an alchemist: He takes the leaden stuff of human failibility and with his dancing body, costumes, props, music, and spoken text, transforms it into risible gold. With this gift he has been making me – and many others – laugh, and sometimes cry, onstage and off, for the better part of two decades; never more so than with *Poodle Farm: CityBoy Born in a CountryBoy's Body*, his first evening-length concert in four years.

Bielemeier's most personal, autobiographical work to date is a dancing memoir laced with monologues about growing up in a small, German-American farming town south of Portland, exposed to a wider world by the great 1950s television comics – especially Lucille Ball – and to dancing by Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers, Katherine and Arthur Murray. Dedicated to his parents, *Poodle Farm* also pays tribute to these entertainers and many more; the roster is recited by its creator at the piece's close.

The work is symmetrical, each section linked by the details of the production as well as the choreography, Bill Boese's splendid lights, and the eclectic collage of popular and classical music. Only the opening music is live, performed by Hoot 'n a Holler (aka Lisa Miller and Lyndee Mah), and it sets the outrageously sophisticated tone.

Clad in wicked combinations of animal prints and country-western garb, Mah and Miller twanged their way through three songs to introduce the CowBoyGirl from the poodle farm. It's clothes that make the CowBoyGirl, for sure: Bielemeier sashayed onstage in black cowboy boots, a slew of crinolines beneath a black, ruffled square-dance skirt, and a man's rodeo shirt, with a Stetson on his bald head and a polka dot scarf around his neck.

Movement also made the character: a boyish slouch, a girlish twitch, a dropped shoulder, a quizzical lifting of the eyebrows – Bielemeier is a master of gestural detail, and one slung hip can say it all. Nevertheless a monologue told us

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how the CowBoyGirl was born: The very young Bielemeier longed to dress up and wear high heels, so he created his own from a pair of socks and poker chips and was caught by his father while he struggled to get out of his sister's slip, which he'd used to complete the costume. A skillful segue into the poodle theme follows – he won a stuffed poodle (a similar one is a prop) at a Christmas drawing at the local drugstore.

Enter Jae Diego, Joan Findlay, and Dorinda Holler in black as three of the most elegant poodles this side of Paris, their hair drawn up into topknots. Their trio was full of edgy wit, big swooping movement juxtaposed against delicate flicks of ankle and wrist, and some physical contact. It wasn't entirely obvious opening night, but by the third performance, the dancers – among Portland's best – were clearly high-stepping, low-rolling poodles at play.

Playfulness in *Poodle Farm* added texture to the truly superb dancing. Bielemeier's solo was made up of shapely, swooping travels across the studio space, but begins with his arms wrapped around his chest in a gesture that focused on his inner life. A long duet with Findlay condensed '50s ballroom dancing and melded it with Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz comedy with the skillful use of an inflatable pink couch. The dynamic between the couple was at times so wistful and tender – Bielemeier's hand on Findlay's shoulder, Findlay for a second covering it with hers – it made me weep.

Bielemeier well understands that without tears there can be no laughter, and without laughter life is unbearable. *Poodle Farm* is a fitting tribute to the comedians who made life worth living for a young boy longing for city lights, confused about his sexuality, destined to be an artist. In these uncertain, painful times, such work is indispensable, like gold.