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Dancing, Pure and Simple, Comes to Fore in 'Red Hat'

Production offers pared-down look at athleticism, choreography

By Stephen Blair

Fans of glitzy production values will find the four spare, intimate pieces in "Red Hat and Other Dances" wanting.

But the athletic body movement, fluid choreography and provocative themes should appeal to those who don't subscribe to the "Riverdance" school of sensory overload.

Mike Barber, a Portland resident who co-directed the now defunct aero/betty aerial dance theater, is the driving force behind the show. He choreographed two short solos—"This is Mike" and "Idee Fixe"—and the half-hour title piece, "Red Hat."

He also dances in "This is Mike," "Red Hat" and "Misgivings," a piece by visiting choreographer Randee Paufve.

Barber has worked with Gregg Bielemeier, Minh Tran, Ashley Roland and other movers and shakers in the Portland dance community. But he speaks most fondly of his job as teacher of at-risk children at Chapman Elementary School in Northwest Portland.

"The work is deeply personal to me," he says. "I'm drawn to the kids' directness and candor."

"This is Mike" is based on a 5-year-old student who made references to Barber in his classroom journal.

Barber will punctuate his agile dance passages with spoken text and recite lines such as "Mike holding G.I. Joe's hand" to dramatize the journal entries. He will pass out copies of drawings from the journal before the show.

"Idee Fixe," the most abstract piece in the program, is danced by Jenn Gierada to a soundtrack that mixes instrumental music with a whispering voice. Barber says the piece "looks at repetitive patterns in nature and psyche, and the benefits of breaking out of a pattern."

"Red Hat," the program's final piece, has been in the works for more than a year. Funny and unpredictable, it features Barber along with Daniel Addy and Tracy Broyles. Dressed in white, the dancers don pointy red hats in some sequences.

Barber is presenting "Red Hat and Other Dances" at Conduit Studio.

He thinks the Portland dance scene would be more dynamic if people brought their acts to less conventional venues. In fact, he has performed at the wine bar Crush, and he hopes to stage informal dance events at Le Happy restaurant and Ohm nightclub. He's even considering holding a dance event at a Laundromat.