

# The Oregonian

Dance review

## 'Gust' review: TopShakeDance troupe's performance is intense, quick and fluid

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**Bob Hicks, Special to the Oregonian**

One of the pleasures of following contemporary dance in Portland in the past dozen or so years has been watching Jim McGinn develop into one of the city's best and most arresting dancers. Of late he's added choreography to the mix, taking what he's learned dancing for the likes of Tere Mathern, Mary Oslund and Linda Austin and fusing it with his own outlook on dance.

A year ago he formed his own company, **TopShakeDance**, and on Thursday night at **Conduit**, the six-dancer troupe debuted "Gust," an hour-long piece it's been developing for pretty much that entire time. It's been a year well-spent.

"Gust" is a quick, fluid, intensely musical dance, focused on a single idea yet varied enough in its movements to hold the audience's interest for an hour. In fact, one of its greatest charms is that it's aware of its audience's needs: Without ever pandering, it entertains.

The driving force behind "Gust" is, simply, wind: its power, its weight, its freedom, its unpredictability, its destructive potential, its relentlessness, its restless movement, its impact on both the land and the human soul. The dance is abstract, often with the

appearance of randomness (who knows which way the wind blows?), yet in fact it's formally structured.

And six is a good number: The dancers work in twos, threes, fours, solos and ensembles, flowing easily among them.

This is a top-flight group of dancers, from its least experienced (Chase Hamilton, who was in high school two years ago) to its most. It also includes McGinn, Dana Detweiler, Jessica Hightower, Amanda Morse and Ailey II vet Pamela James. The movement is fiercely extended, whole body, with a lot of floor work, and it's intensely interested in imbalances and variations in strength and weight.

At times it has a very earthy, Martha Graham-like solidity, that peasants-on-the-prairie sort of thing. At other times the dancers flicker in the breeze, like particles being blown capriciously. All six dancers are sharp and fully committed to the style, a testament to their skills and the time taken to develop this piece.

Composer Loren Chasse's score is absolutely essential to the dance's success, as much a driving force as the wind itself. In fact, his music is driven by

the wind: It's based on field recordings of wind sounds, from vague rustlings to the creakings of fences or gates to liberating gales. Again, though, it isn't random. Those are his starting points, and what he builds from them is melodic, shaped, and sometimes beautiful.

Chris Balo's sensitive lighting is all the set design that "Gust" needs in Conduit's intimate space. This sort of collaboration, which needs a nurturing home, is precisely why Conduit, for all its tininess, remains a crucial player on the Portland dance scene.

One caveat: Can we please let the dance start when it starts? As the audience files in, the dancers already are lying still on the floor, waiting, and the dread question rises yet again: Are we supposed to be watching now, or what? Nobody's quite sure. A few people turn their focus on the dancers (still not moving). Others pull out their smart phones, check messages, chat with their neighbors, scrape their chairs as they settle in. The dancers are still dead to the world, or maybe undead: no one's quite sure.

Meanwhile, the audience loses control of that settling-in period, and feels a little manipulated, not in a good way. This is a fine, well-shaped dance. Let it have an actual beginning as well as an end.

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