

# The Oregonian

## 'Near to the Wild Heart' review: Amber Whitehall's precise expression of ambiguity

Friday, January 13, 2012

**Marty Hughley**

"I'm not trying to be conceptual, I'm not trying to be abstract," Amber Whitehall says, early in her solo performance piece "Near to the Wild Heart." Perhaps, to paraphrase Jessica Rabbit, she's just drawn to it.

"I'm not trying to discard meaning; I'm trying to find meaning," she continues, as she contorts her body upon and around a simple wooden chair in the middle of a bare floor at Conduit, the downtown Portland dance studio.

Fair enough. Meaning is in the mind of the beholder, you might say. The paths to it are many and varied. And Whitehall's performance – perhaps best described as a movement-enhanced monologue – ambles down several over the course of an hour that's experimental and exploratory, but not nearly as aimless as it sometimes pretends to be.

She starts out with a deadpan list of ways someone might die ("a sliced vein...a broken heart...she was carried off by a swarm of ants..."). She munches mouthfuls of grapes. As if in some abstracted reverie, she muses about the nature of performance and the construction of the self. Then suddenly she stands feet from her audiences, gazes directly into the eyes watching her and asks, "Should I have anxiety about being 'entertaining'?"

And there's one of the wonderful ironies of her performance. While making few concessions to conventional, audience friendly notions of what constitutes entertainment, Whitehall is fun to watch. Her movements, facial expressions, shifts in vocal tone all have an admirable specificity. She and director Jacob Coleman show a keen sense for when to leaven the work's overarching intellectualism with self-deprecating wit.

But in other respects her disregard of the impulse to entertain comes with a cost. Despite her early declaration about searching for meaning, after much twisting, defying and suspending of narrative logic, she talks of being unwilling to accept "the terrible limitations of a life lived by what can be made to make sense."

That might be a liberating choice, on a personal level. But can sense and meaning truly exist apart from each other? Even though meaning is elusive, don't both psyche and society demand that we present some version of it, however provisional?

Whitehall is talented and likeable. But this is the kind of art that can make you want to reply, "Yes, yes, confusion and

uncertainty are part of the fabric of life. Now suck it up and tell us a story!"

Then again, for those with a taste for the unconventional, the sharp performance skills shown in "Near to the Wild Heart" bode well. Whitehall and Coleman are part of the newly formed Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble, an outgrowth of the now defunct Fever Theatre. Fever artistic director Kate Sanderson also is in the new troupe, along with the talented actress Cristi Miles (who starred in "Dying City" at Portland Playhouse and Portland Shakespeare Project's "As You Like It") and Portland newcomer Rebecca Lingafelter (now in Third Rail Rep's "Collapse").

The group has begun the process of creating its first devised work, which it will – in a manner similar to Hand2Mouth Theatre – present in various stages of completion over the next two years.

**"Near to the Wild Heart"**

**When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays through Jan. 22**

**Where: Conduit Dance, 918 S.W. Yamhill St., Suite 401**

**Tickets: \$15, [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com), or cash/check at the door**

© 2012 The Oregonian

conduit  
dance, inc