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VISIT INCUBATES INGENIOUS DANCE

By Catherine Thomas
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In one of the most original performances seen on Conduit's dance stage this season, Linda Austin, Sally Silvers and Cydney Wilkes -- three veterans of New York's East Village avant-garde performance art scene -- transformed the space into an otherworldly theater of the bizarre.

In "Tijuana Picnic," their four-part program that concluded Sunday, peculiarity reigned in a play of extremes: grotesquerie became elegant, fitful dreams materialized in movement, and cartoon-like wrestlers clashed.

Austin, co-founder of the local experimental dance center Performance Works Northwest, has forged a reputation as one of the region's most innovative constructors of movement collage, an abstractionist who employs wildly hybrid props. A former Silvers dancer, Austin recently brought the New York postmodernist to Portland for a three-week residency, culminating in the creation of a new work.

The evening's title work, which Silvers choreographed for Austin, Wilkes, Jesse Berdine and Jim McGinn, revealed Silvers in possession of abundant wit and a striking ability to forge a coherent theme from chaotic movement. Clad in chaps over black tights and kneepads, the foursome spewed water from their mouths, puffed their stomachs, teased the audience with sizzling samba swivels, and went head-to-head in acrobatic showdowns.

Austin was at the peak of her craft in her solo "Of Monsters & Marvels," creating with only a smattering of props a carny freak show of misfits. Austin's head, encased in a television monitor, played warped close-ups of contorted grimaces; video mutated her body into a plastic doll exposing fish-scale flesh.

Silvers' celebrated solo, "Shouting Out Loud," was virtually incomprehensible in its pastiche of wayward appendages and quick-fire movements that dared the viewer to look away. Silvers danced one moment with a yogi's calm and the next like a helter-skelter caricature, her ingenuity clearly on display.