

No Happily Ever After

Theater Review

February 19, 2009

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The Portland Mercury

If theater has a future, it lies with companies like Hand2Mouth, a young ensemble as comfortable exploring theoretical depths as they are splashing around in the shallow end of the pop culture pool. Their well-received show Repeat After Me, curated into the 2007 TBA festival, was a colorful, frenetic, and, above all, catchy exploration of the soul of America as expressed in popular music. This weekend, the company produces another show squarely rooted in pop music: ensemble member Faith Helma's solo show Undine, brought to life for one weekend at downtown's Conduit Dance studio. Undine, though, has less to do with the soul of the nation than with the soul of one peculiarly fractured rock musician.

It's a curious little show, structured as a musical performance rather than an explicitly theatrical one. Helma portrays a singer who's performing a series of songs about a fairy tale. The fairy tale, Undine, is about a water spirit who leaves the ocean to live with a fisherman; in the singing of songs about Undine, Helma's singer slowly unravels onstage, a classic rock 'n' roll meltdown meant to conjure, as Hand2Mouth Artistic Director Jonathan Walters puts it, the "history of women musicians having nervous breakdowns onstage."

In a club setting, Helma's seamlessly solipsistic character might be indistinguishable from any self-absorbed hippie frontwoman who's missed the boat on adulthood. Said Walters of Undine previews at Holocene and the Someday Loounge, "People who had no idea it's an art show were like, 'God, is she weird.'"

If the whole thing sounds dangerously close to just watching, well, a hippie sing about fairy tales, it almost is. Undine is saved by a few things: Helma is a riveting performer, and her sonic meltdown is utterly plausible. The

show's sound design lends a complex and deceptive element, as Helma loops her own voice and occasionally lip synchs to herself. And most importantly, the show is suffused with self-awareness: Hand2Mouth has built a reputation by challenging the audience/performer relationship. Here, that relationship is sometimes symbiotic, sometimes parasitic, and never taken for granted.