

Thoughtful Surrealism and British Silliness at the Invasion

by Robert Trussell 📅 July 16, 2016 📁 Performing, Theater Reviews

Finding new ways to tell stories on stage is something theatergoers should root for. So *The Warriors: A Love Story* scores points from the get-go.

This production was created by ARCOS Dance, a company founded by Erica Gionfriddo and Curtis Uhlemann in Austin, Texas. The show is part of the Kansas City International Theatre Festival, also known as the Invasion, which continues through July 23.

Warriors is by turns mesmerizing, moving, inspiring and sometimes a bit unweildly as it explores the life and legacy of philosopher J. Glenn Gray and his wife, Ursula. Although opposed to war, Gray served in Army intelligence in Germany during World War II. After the war's end, he met Ursula Werner, a survivor of the horrific Dresden bombing raids. They fell in love, married and settled in Colorado.



ARCOS Dance performs *The Warriors: A Love Story* at the Invasion. Photo by Lynn Lane.

Their relationship mirrors the theme of this production — that love can redeem us no matter how brutal or degrading life's journey may have been.

The performance is narrated by Eliot Gray Fisher, the couple's grandson, who guides us through their story, although not always in chronological order. The sophisticated multi-media production incorporates archival film and sound recordings, video and photographic projections, animation and music, some recorded, some performed live by Fisher at the keyboards.

The dancers are highly skilled, intensely expressive and strike a delicate balance between artistry and athleticism. Some of their abilities are captured in high-def video projections.

The show feels a bit too long — certain points are made more than once in the kaleidoscopic narrative — and at times the dance sequences seem extraneous. As a whole, however, this is thoughtful and thought-provoking theater that repeatedly brings our focus to fundamental questions about human existence.

One of the striking images, shared by Fisher in his laid-back narration, is that of Ursula fleeing the flames of Dresden and discovering that an ostrich that had escaped from the destroyed zoo was running beside her. It's a compelling surrealistic juxtaposition fleetingly depicted in animations that appear on a large screen above the stage. It underscores the point that there are moments in human existence when very little separates us from other animals.

That's just one of multiple images likely to linger in your mind's eye long after the house lights come up. This is a show that sticks with you.

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Also at the Invasion:

I've admired the work of British theater artist Gavin Robertson in his repeated appearances at the Invasion through the years. His work can be cerebral and absorbing (*The Six-Sided Man*, *Crusoe*) or just out-and-out funny (*Bond*).

Though it pains me to say so, his latest offering disappoints. The show, *Escape From the Planet of the Day That Time Forgot*, is a muddled satire that spoofs British science-fiction tropes of an earlier era. Robertson performs the piece with Katharine Hurst and Simon Nader in a wacky tale about a pipe-smoking professor, his attractive young ward and a nerdy assistant who travel to another planet and pass through an opening in the space-time continuum. Along for the ride is the unseen family dog whose presence is announced by "woofs" from the actors.

The set consists of gray cardboard boxes, three ironing boards and a hand-held vacuum, all of which are utilized by the actors with varying degrees of success. The best moment comes late in the show when Robertson, Hurst and Nader employ their formidable physical theater skills to impersonate dinosaurs.

Robertson and company might want pop this effort back in the oven because "half baked" is the phrase that comes to mind. It felt more like an improv workshop than a polished performance for the public.

The Kansas City International Theatre Festival continues through July 23 at the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre, 3614 Main St., and the Little Theatre at Penn Valley Community College, 3201 Southwest Trafficway. For a complete schedule, go to www.cstkc.com. 816-569-3226.



From left, Katharine Hurst, Gavin Robertson and Simon Nader in *Escape From the Planet of the Day That Time Forgot*. Photo by Zoe Hunn.

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Robert Trussell is a veteran journalist who has covered news, arts and theater in Kansas City for almost four decades.