

BACK STAGE WEST
March 30-April 5, 2000

Subversions

At the Subway Terminal Building

Reviewed by Scott Proudfit

Three women sit at sewing machines, producing reams of skin. Each ream spools around a wrapped figure in fetal position, lying forgotten behind the industrious backs of the white-coated workers. From the far end of the cavernous space, a woman in a stiff, ornate dress glides on rollerblades, weaving through the darkness toward the laborers. Her long fingertips blaze with blue fire, lighting the path.

Rarely does a show deserve description more than criticism. Collage Dance Thatre's *subVersions* is one of these special cases. When, in theatre, ideas and images are powerful enough, no words of praise are as appropriate as mere recollection.



The latest and most ambitious of this site-specific dance company's events is set in the underground labyrinth of the abandoned Subway Terminal Building in Downtown L.A. In the course of an evening, the audience makes a journey through the crumbling ruins of this once venerable edifice, down narrow hallways and immense dormitories toward the shadowed tunnel that is the last stop. At the same time, this journey is revealed as the journey of life, from birth to death. It's also a journey through the human body - stops have titles such as "Easy To Digest," "Live and Let Liver" and "The Story the Skin Tells."

Three simultaneous journeys may be a lot to take in, but then again, the often jarring juxtaposition of symbols and ideas is the strength of any successful collage.

The piece is like a Disney dark ride through L.A.'s past. But midway on the journey, this train gets a little off track. As the surroundings become more mundane - fantastically decrepit ballrooms lead to linoleum hallways and sterile, abandoned hospital wards - so does the show, which moves from beautifully silent junk ballets to talky, ironic comic bits in cramped quarters. It's a move from symbolic artistic performance to specific

performance art, and it's unwarranted. Luckily, by journey's end, the company gets back on track.

For the final image, choreographed to composer JAC Redford's haunting score and set at the immense tunnel's watery mouth, performers slowly carry a white wooden boat off into the darkness while a sailor onboard signals through the haze with her flickering lantern until all is consumed by black. Iconic, profound, yet playful, it's the kind of thing Collage does best, and it's also some of the best theatre to be found in L.A. or anywhere.

Credit goes to art director BJ Krivanek, whose awe-inspiring use of these amazing, cave-like rooms makes one marvel at how expensive these interiors would have been if they had been built from scratch - but then, such is the logic behind site-specific theatre.

Writer Terry Wolverton handles the multi-linear structure of the evening with an appropriately light, poetic touch. But the stars of *subVersions* are, of course, artistic director and choreographer Heidi Duckler and her fantastic ensemble of performers, whose abilities run the gamut from clown to classic ballet. All deserve mention: Mona Jean Cedar, Sufi Erthur, Vince Hederman, Susan Kawashima, Karyn Klein, Ting-Chi Li, Franny McCartney, Kerry McGrath, Elizabeth Nairn, Doreen O'Malley, Dorcas Roman, Josie Walsh, and Heather White. Bryan Randall as the amused and slightly menacing tour guide for the journey - the Brain, as he is called - also deserves special mention.

As opposed to the deteriorated glory of this once great terminal building, Collage Dance Theatre's impressive endeavor proves that all ambitions don't necessarily end in ruin.