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And for the Next Course, a Dash of Dali

By Lewis Segal

Think Pink if you visit Perino's Restaurant for Collage Dance Theatre's latest site-specific extravaganza, "A Hunger Artist." The company wants its audiences to match the décor of this once-fabled Hollywood hangout in the mid-Wilshire area - so pink walls, pink booths, pink lighting and pink costumes enforce a rosy, cozy opulence made even more lush by a few contrasting details, such as the remaining black wrought-iron flamingos out front.

Designed in 1949 and now slated for demolition, Perino's allows director/choreographer Heidi Duckler to serve up visions of the past with more than a soupçon of surrealism. Moving the audience in shifts, she places 1930s-style marathon dances in the ballroom, plate-smashing psychodrama in the kitchen and a spectacular gymnastic showpiece for Hassan Christopher, Marissa LaBog and Paolo Alcedo in, on, under and around the bar.

Most of the action, however, takes place in the restaurant area, with a platoon of Collage performers repeating diverse one-minute solos (dance, magic tricks, character comedy, salad making) at each of the tables before joining forces for an extended waiters' gallop in the center of the room.



Accented with passages of aggression, this ensemble stays deliberately warped and off-kilter: "Hello Dali," if you like. But it mimics and mocks floor-show pizazz artfully enough to confirm Duckler's talent as a dance maker. Superimposed on all the activity - and deepening its implications - are texts by Merridawn Duckler and extracts from the Franz Kafka story "A Hunger Artist." Performed by actors John Pleshette, Richard Azurdia, Craig Ng and others, these spoken passages touch on current obsessions with fitness and dieting but increasingly focus on fasting as a public spectacle.

However, like marathon dancing - and Perino's itself - virtuoso professional starvation belongs to the past: "It used to pay well to stage such great performances," chanteuse Franny McCartney sang nostalgically at the Wednesday press review. "But today that is quite impossible... We live in a different world now."

The Collage performance dramatizes the difference but also the legacy of that bygone world. Food remains at the center of our existence, of course, and serving food can be a challenging performance skill, just as taking off the pounds is often set to music and choreographed.

We may not pay to watch extreme hunger anymore - unfortunately, we see it free all too often on the news. But as Pleshette coos Kafka at us over a menu or Chris Stanley performs intense contortions on a chair to keep us entertained until the entrees arrive, we glimpse exactly how much illusion still leavens our daily bread.