

ROGUE REVIEW: NOCO's 'Soft as Animal'

Before the first performance Friday of "Soft as Animal," Amy Querin — the founder and artistic director of the [Fresno Dance Collective](#) (NOCO) — made an important announcement. This is the first Rogue show in the company's four-year history, she told the audience, that is being staged without the participation of guest artists.

That's a major step for NOCO, which continues to grow and mature into an impressive mainstay of Fresno's dance scene.

If you're familiar with Querin's work, there is much you'll recognize in "Soft as Animal," which is inspired by the lyrics of Ryan O'Neal's song "Careful Hands." There's a prominent integration of dance with non-narrative film, a strong focus on aerial choreography, and a contemplative (but occasionally combustible) style of movement that often features pairs of dancers in intriguing combinations. Like her big Rogue work last year, "The Eternity Project," there are themes in this year's work of control and submission, of nature and animals, of the primal spirit spreading and — perhaps — evolving. Add to that Querin's blend of the literal (animal masks and horns) and the transcendental (an almost religious-ritualistic sensibility), her twist on gender stereotypes (feminizing the masculine and vice versa), an interest in texture (soft animal skins, taut human bodies) and her passion for moody, meditative music, and it's a full-bore sensory experience.

There are some stunning moments in the 45-minute work, which is broken into six movements. In the first movement, featuring a film by Jackie Aldern, the projected image is first seen on a screen partially obscured by drapes. A dancer at mid-stage takes a swath of aerial fabric and draws it in front of the projection, and suddenly part of the film — which captures images of animal-headed dancers moving through a forest — seems to jump toward the audience. Later, two dancers share the aerial apparatus, their limber bodies offering support to each other as they move as one.



Most strikingly, the aerial maneuvers — executed with the kind of precise confidence that signifies countless hours of preparation — instill in the work an expansiveness that makes it seem bigger than the stage. One of my favorite visuals was that of a circle of dancers around the apparatus, all lying on their backs with legs raised skyward, as the sole dancer enmeshed in the fabric soared above it all.

What did I divine from this non-narrative work overall? I've already alluded to a hopeful sense of evolution, which is perhaps too narrative of a reaction on my part, but I think it matches the tone of O'Neal's lyrics. ("Cranes are creeping, lifting metal. We will find new ways to settle," he writes.) Or perhaps this is the sentimental side of me hoping for a progression forward for the human race. I think Querin relishes this ambiguity, hoping that the total package of her work — this intriguing little world she creates — sparks something inside each viewer. I'd love to hear what you, the reader, took away from the show.

In terms of cohesiveness and impact, "Soft as Animal" far exceeds last year's "Eternity Project," which had a more sprawling, scattered feel. I do think at times that Querin's choreography in "Animal" could use some judicious editing. Some moments feel fussy and overstuffed, as if she came up with so many intriguing ideas that she couldn't bear to pare all but the best away. Querin loves to experiment with fascinating props and costumes, which can make for some striking visuals (such as the high-waisted, corset-like cumberbunds worn by the male dancers in the powerful last movement), but those devices can also detract from the fluidity of the work. A ribbed, hoop-skirt-like costume, for example, was beautiful in design but downright clunky on the dancer wearing it.

One other criticism not directed at the work itself but the performance: A (presumably sanctioned) photographer clicked away throughout the opening-night performance with distracting regularity, the sound of the shutter all too audible. For a work with such a quiet soundtrack and introspective sensibility, it was frustrating. Company photos are a good thing, but not this way. That's what promotional photo shoots are for.

But those are mere quibbles. Querin's vision and passion for dance is charming and encompassing. This latest production from NOCO swallows you whole into the world it creates.

Show info: 7 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. March 7, 7 p.m. March 8, 11:30 a.m. March 9, Severance Theatre, 1401 N. Wishon Ave. Rating: G. [[Details](#)]



Donald Munro

Donald Munro is The Bee's arts and culture critic. He currently has the opening song to "Galavant" stuck in his head and doesn't know if he can ever get it out.