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DANCE REVIEW

A Topsy-Turvy Beauty In Anxious Encounters

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

Four performers from Prague who hang upside down to tell us something about the human condition might even tell us something we do not know.

"Hanging Man," a bare-bones but imaginative production presented on Friday night at the Kitchen by Alfred in the Courtyard, a Czech movement-theater troupe, is another manifestation of the suspended-in-the-air mania that has gripped dance and theater groups worldwide.

In the United States most of the current aerial choreography comes from modern-dance troupes, a belated follow-up on the off-the-ground experiments of the early 1970's by a variety of choreographers, including Trisha Brown. But "Hanging Man" offers a different sensibility.

Undoubtedly this is because Ctibor Turba, the founder and director of Alfred in the Courtyard, comes out of the time-honored Czech mime tradition that produced experimental companies like *Laterna Magika* and the Black Theater of Prague. Pioneers in mixed-media productions, these groups used technology to create illusion.

In "Hanging Man" Mr. Turba, who collaborated with his performers, openly presents mechanical devices and props. Halka Tresnakova and three men, Kamil Bystricky, Petr Kruselnicky and Ondrej Lipovsky, often hang head down on ropes that are raised, pulley fashion, by a technician. Occasionally, the performer wears an ice skate with a closed hook around its blade.

In effect these performers are mimes, attuned to the nuances of physical effort and expression. A corporeal image of the body functions on two levels here. We see the blood rush not only to the men's heads but also to their bare chests

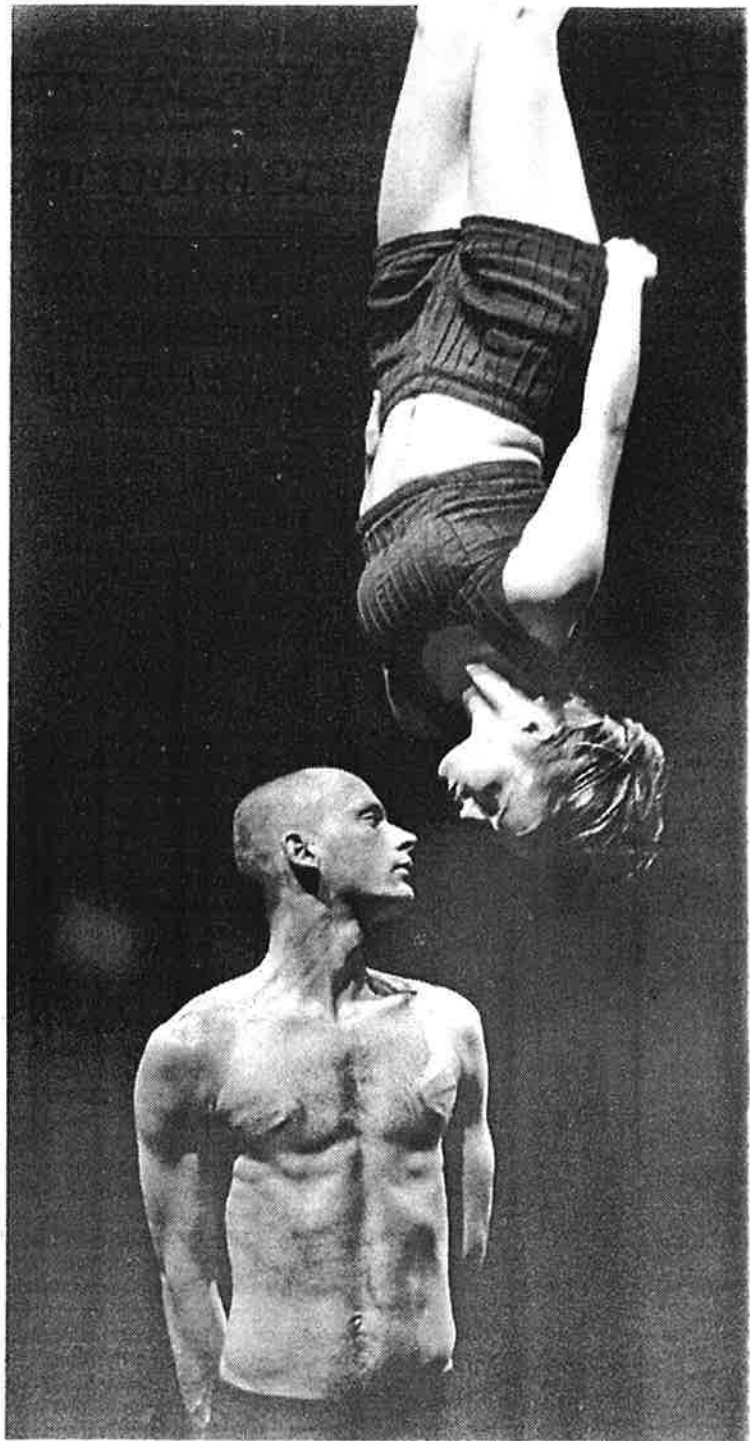
Mime, but with a neo-Expressionist kind of twist.

and empathize kinetically with their endurance as they curl upward, twist and delineate shapes in the air against a gravitational pull.

Yet with a few exceptions, like the segments called "Separations," formal design is not Mr. Tibor's concern. He has replaced the dreamlike poetry of early Czech mime with a neo-Expressionist strain that has also influenced Japanese Butoh dance. His men have shaved heads, Butoh-style; the head-down image was once popularized by the Butoh troupe, Sankai Juko. Beauty here is in the grotesque and dislocated body.

Emphasis is on muscular control and nuance, especially in a segment in which Ms. Tresnakova sits upright on a trapeze and moves her tongue inside her mouth or thrusts it out at various and amazing lengths. It is a tour de force of physical manipulation as a range of emotion passes over her changing face.

Jiri Stivin's eclectic music, incorporating flute solos and cool jazz, serves as background for a series of encounters. One is increasingly passionate as Ms. Tresnakova is positioned head-down to a man whose feet are attached to a platform. Later two men, with carapaces on their backs, become combative insects. At another time a hanging man, in a rite of initiation, knocks down a pile of giant pickup sticks. Three men hang, their entangled bodies twisted in an existential embrace. "Hanging Man" does not have a consistent metaphoric dimension, but its search for joining the metaphysical and the physical is well worth following.



Tom Braz

Halka Tresnakova, top, and Ondrej Lipovsky in "The Hanging Man."