

REVIEW: NICHOLAS LEICHTER DANCE: KILLA



Photo by Andrew Smrz

L-R: Stephanie Liapis, Monstah Black (back), Nicholas Leichter



Nicholas Leichter Dance kills it at the Joyce

By [QUINN BATSON](#)
Offoffoff.com

It's easy to forget that nightclub dance, especially at the gay fringe, often pulls modern and popular dance into new territory. Nicholas Leichter is a club kid at heart with the brains to wrestle club dancing onstage and make a compelling show of it. With the help of most of the original cast members in *Free the Angels* (2001) and live performances by Monstah Black and college kids from Detroit in the new piece *Killa*, Nicholas Leichter Dance made the audience love life for awhile.

NICHOLAS LEICHTER DANCE: KILLA

Choreography by: Nicholas Leichter.
Dancers: *Free the Angels*: Clare Byrne, Daniel Clifton, Jared Kaplan, Amy Larimer, Holly Handman-Lopez, Will Rawls

Free the Angels is a joyous, offertory dance to music by Stevie Wonder. From the beautiful opening of Will Rawls holding Clare Byrne aloft, the core of the piece is couples, but this is equally a piece for the whole group, as couples shift and change fluidly and emphasize the connection of everyone onstage and off. The movement quality is quick and soft, with lovely rhythmic gaps breaking up big flowing arm movements. Smooth shoulders and hips drive most of the unison dancing, but nothing stays constant long, with quick, often surprising lifts, flying entrances and exits, and random grabs and holds that keep people connected for just that much longer, sometimes creating fluid trains of connected people, a favorite Leichter technique. Quick moves onto and off the ground, with softly controlled collapses and big pushoffs, also give the piece a gymnastic feel. Memorable moments include a solo of huge and soft movement by Will Rawls that seems to reach all corners of the space, a sweet transition duet between Daniel Clifton and Holly Handman-Lopez that goes from tender at the end of one song to active and floor-sliding with the beginning of the next, and a typical moment of broad humor from Clare Byrne, who stays just a few extra gasping breaths at the edge of the stage to remind us that much of the cast is close to forty and dancing a piece that would exhaust most 20-year-olds. Brisk lighting design by Christine Shallenberg really helps as well, often with intriguing broken-ray sidelight, and backstage klieg lights that initially blind the audience eventually swallow dancers as they melt away into the darkness between the lights to end the piece gently.

Killa: Lauren Basco, Wendell Cooper, Aaron Draper, Matthew Heggem, Nicholas Leichter, Stephanie Liapis, Dawn Robinson, Laurie Taylor with Leandro Damasco Jr., Bryan Strimpel, Kate Vincek and Alexandra Martin from Wayne State University
and Monstah Black, singing and dancing.
Music by: Stevie Wonder, Monstah Black, MIA, Basement Jaxx, Lionrock.
Lighting design by: Christine Shallenberg.
Singing: Monstah Black.

SCHEDULE

Joyce Theater
June 24, 26, 28, 2009



Photo by Andrew Smrz

Killa crew: Stephanie Liapis, Lauren Basco, Dawn Robinson

Killa is a dance phenomenon. If *Free the Angels* is almost relentlessly frenetic, *Killa* is the next step beyond, manic and inspired. Monstah Black, self-described well as Messiah

of the Funk, opens the piece caught in a net in the backstage wall, lit with red and singing that "you can't win" as Leichter and dancers handgesture the phrase in a distinctive club sign language while dancing in badass unison wearing sneaks, suits, shades and fedoras. Four college kids from Wayne State University's dance conservatory tear it up throughout with pop and sizzle, but NLD members don't cede them an inch in a protracted danceoff throwdown broken up by two strong interludes. The first is a poignant, you-can't-win-signing solo by Leichter that ends with a silent black power fist that effectively says, "ah, but we have." The second is a really rich duet between Monstah Black, singing in satyr heels, and Dawn Robinson, dancing under the influence of his voice. Think of the MC in the movie *Fifth Element* for some idea of the Monstah Black persona, with Black being less manic and more substantive. With all the sharp, fast, funny, funky acrobatics going on onstage, it is still hard to look away from Leichter when he is onstage. This is his movement, and he owns it, with extra doses of punch and flair. The whole piece is a celebration of the virtuosity and ingenuity of club dancing, and a clap-along, individual-showcase ending seals the deal.

JUNE 25, 2009

OFFOFFOFF.COM • THE GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE NEW YORK