



Nicholas Leichter

Photo by Olubode Shawn Brown

Giving Oz Soul and Pumps

The Whiz: Obamaland dresses up and gets down

By [QUINN BATSON](#)
Offoffoff.com

There is such a good mix of humor, serious boundary-pushing and joyful dancing in Nicholas Leichter Dance's *The Whiz: Obamaland*. It's not clear how Obama is related to Oz, but since the Oz of *Obamaland* is a very colorful, everything's-good-anything-goes place, it's probably safe to say the connection is meant to be good. President Obama's inaugural speech over R and B music for an opening soundscape is a little discordant, but several-colored spotlights on an empty stage center are a beautiful intro to and preview of lighting magic to come.

After a heavily weighted quartet of shifting duets and group lifts, Nicholas Leichter comes out in a suit for an opening solo that is b-boy sharp and previews the dance magic to come.

As a purply dressed Stephanie Liapis appears and begins dancing a fairly balletish series of steps, Leichter joins her in new purplish clothes of his own for a pleasantly dancey duet. The purple palette is expanded to everyone often throughout the piece to richly royal effect, and the color shifts and choices in costuming throughout the piece are lush and sensual, with Susan Soetart and the company choosing dancer clothes and singers Monstah Black and Yozmit choosing their own odd and elegant outfits.

Monstah Black is back in force as the satyr MC/dionysian singer, with occasionally excellent backing vocals by Aaron Draper and Leichter and some of his own prerecorded harmonies and lines. Draper also milks some boyish jester roles, especially as electric-fan-bearer to Dawn Robinson's hair-flinging Diana Ross and later as a skinny but slinky pop-and-locking whiteboy boxer.



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L-R: Wendell Cooper, Nicholas Leichter, Aaron Draper, Lauren Basco, Laurie Taylor, Dawn Robinson

Wendell Cooper werrks a second suited solo to early-Minneoplis/Prince-era band The Time's version of "O Whee O". The werk deepens as Keon Thoulouis, Lauren Basco and Leichter join in one by one until it becomes a Michael Jacksonish quartet in funky suit-and-fedora lockstep to the song "U Can't Win."

Everyone in purply clothes then dances the first of several infectiously fun group pieces, full of smoothly funky arm whips and easy jumps. It is these group pieces that bring home how fully soulful all of the Nicholas Leichter dancers are, not just flaunting technique but offering up the joy in generous ass-powered movement.

Wendell Cooper takes another striking turn, this time in microminiskirt and heels, somehow making tattooed arms and man-muscled legs a fiercely ambisexual attribute.

Lighting choices by Erik C. Bruce throughout are great, but there is some serious lighting beauty in several later sections, beginning especially with red, white and blue spots on an empty Obama-speeched stage that swirl and dance away. The ensuing sections where color is part of the point in a satire of shifting fashions — "ya gotta be seen in green"/red instead/gold is it — are an excellent mix of light and costume. Bruce uses 6 or 7 of the fully moveable, unlimited-color-choice automated rockshow stagelights to full effect in a full complement of lights and looks.

Singer/performer Yozmit does some serious gender-stretching with and without clothes in a dramatic and eery solo turn, and another group piece full of glitter and gold and black and a heartwarming and heartrending solo by Lauren Basco to "Believe in Yourself"

bring us full circle to a simple, perfect ending of a solo Nicholas Leichter putting on the ruby shoes to go "Home" as the reclining Monstah Black sings him there.

JUNE 23, 2010