

'Falling & Loving' invents a new way to look at love

By: ROBERT JOHNSON | September 25, 2019



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From left, Akiko Aizawa, Luciany Germán, Stephen Webber, Fabio Tavares, Ellen Lauren and Kairis Daniels in "Falling & Loving."

Love has never been messier than in "Falling & Loving," the brilliant new dance-theater piece to issue from choreographer Elizabeth Streb and her collaborator, theater director Anne Bogart.

We are talking more than rumpled sheets and bedroom hair, people. Seriously.

In "Falling" —which received its uproarious premiere Sept. 24 as part of the Peak Performances series at Montclair State University, and runs there through Sept. 29 — Cupid's disheveled victims are drenched and blasted by artificial weather. Mysterious powders, green vomit-like fluids and sticky goo all precipitate in great quantities inundating the hapless dancers and actors as they wrestle with the age-old problems that accompany human relationships. Some characters are unceremoniously dumped by their partners; and everyone gets dumped upon.

Streb, whose particular brand of weird science has always involved contraptions, has now invented a weather-machine whose operations fancifully illustrate storms of passion and their consequences. Buckets of granular hail, confetti and suspicious-looking liquids are attached to a giant candelabrum suspended over the stage. Like most relationships, these buckets come with strings attached (maybe heartstrings or emergency cords), and when the performers tug on them they release the most appalling showers. Just as in real life, these make-believe lovers invite their own pitiful, bedraggled condition.

Abetting this mischief, Bogart's actors perform a text culled from the plays of Charles Mee. In these stories, Love descends a steep gradient one step at a time, like Dante on his way to the Inferno. Effusive nature poetry gives way to a discussion about the terrors of staying outdoors after dark, and thoughtful conversations are replaced by shouting matches. A wistful exchange about the simple joys of companionship trades places with a confession of raw, physical attraction. Disillusionment leads to bitterness and then, eventually, to all-out warfare between Will Bond and Ellen Lauren, two undomesticated partners who hurl recriminations at each other while struggling to control a broom.

Barroom confidences, sexual fantasies and fetishes also receive their due. Thankfully, at the end of "Falling," Bogart brings us round to dewy hope again, as if restoring our virginity. It's a journey that may leave viewers reeling.

Bogart's SITI Company has been a group of theatrical carpetbaggers, moving from one dance company to the next to stir up trouble. They had their fun with the Martha Graham Dance Company, re-envisioning Graham's "American Document" in 2010. They created a genuine masterpiece ("A Rite") with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in 2013; and now they've found a delightful way to mess with Streb's troupe, STREB EXTREME ACTION.



Brigitte Manga, left, and, Luciany Germán in "Falling & Loving."

"Falling" marks a huge departure for this choreographer, although her longtime fans can also see a through line. She has always loved the circus and, like a cat, she is fascinated by the sight of falling objects. One can imagine her brain lighting up as substances of different weights and densities plummet through the air, creating temporary mists, shimmering clouds and streams of goop. Narrative be damned. "Falling" is still, on one level, a loopy science experiment.

Nor has Streb abandoned her love of heroism and physical danger. In "Falling," a pair of candy-colored bowling balls hang from the weather-machine, and when dancers set them swinging, a risky game of dodge begins. There has never been such mad confusion on a Streb stage, where the dancers' survival typically depends on split-second timing and military precision. Yet in the intricate ballet that all but concludes this show, we find her dancers once more in supreme control. Executing complicated maneuvers, they drop and roll out of the way just in the nick of time as a bowling ball nearly grazes them. One of these projectiles comes so close to smashing into Luciany Germán's face that she can kiss it.

The SITI actors throw themselves, literally, into this Pop Action work. They take hard falls, and lying stiffly prone they start to jerk and flop as if an EMT had just applied defibrillator paddles. You can practically hear them asking, "Did we sign up for this?" Yes, kids, you sure did.

With a strange sort of optimism, "Falling" offers us consolation in a fable about the Arizona desert and its geology. Cataclysmic inundations and droughts have come and gone there. In the grand scheme of things, however, even the worst we can imagine — a beloved's abrupt departure, for instance, or the Apocalypse itself — is only temporary. "After the end of the world, life goes on."

"Falling & Loving" will be presented at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, Sept. 25-27 at 7:30 p.m., Sept. 28 at 8 p.m. and Sept. 29 at 3 p.m. Visit [peakperfs.org](https://www.peakperfs.org) (<https://www.peakperfs.org>).

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