

REVIEW: Lionel Popkin's 'Inflatable Trio' at the Skirball

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by debra levine

Do you feel that things are changing in ways that make you uneasy? That even our most familiar modes of operating—what political pundits refer to as “norms,” for example public civility—are in upheaval?

Choreographer **Lionel Popkin** has made a dance about this. His charming and successful “Inflatable Trio,” a fun hour-long dance pageant for three, premiered at the **Skirball Cultural Center**’s new Performance Lab series this weekend.

Popkin, who doubles as chair of the UCLA dance department, theatricalizes the conversation by use of a big metaphor – the familiar furniture of the family living room. There, these days, planted on sofas across America, many of us cower in abject terror of the nightly news. In a witty transformation, Popkin converts this inert set-up into something dynamic (that is, dancey) by use of a kooky yellow PVC blow-up couch. Throughout “Inflatable Trio,” this moveable object cuddles and cushions, frames and frustrates, gets kicked and battered, and hides and protects Popkin and two excellent cohorts, dancers Carolyn Hall and Samantha Mohr.



“Inflatable Trio” is powered by the use of human breath, not just in propping up the props, but in the sweet intimacy displayed between performers. The constant friendly touching, straight-forward human contact — often by forehead ‘knock,’ often by hands-on-body-parts — permeates the work with a pleasing tactility, a sensitive closeness, a fleshiness, a grounding. A high moment has the threesome pulsating to a funky rhythm (among the hooks of Tom Lopez’s excellent soundscore). In a rocking, weight-shifting dance, the always-swapping hands connect the trio like an ever-tightening umbilical cord. Soon ‘connection’ and ‘intimacy’ cross the line into a crazy inescapable noose.

I was charmed by “Inflatable”’s many homely humors, the use of daily domestic sounds like the vacuum-cleaner din as furniture is inflated, and the fartatious blast on its deflation. Perhaps low-hanging fruit as a joke, but there it was — and I laughed at it. Popkin, who attires his own stocky build in what looks to be (appropriately) mauve polyester, ports a somewhat dazed, lost-in-space expression that is nicely offset by the clarity of his two partners. Both are excellent but Carolyn Hall’s crystalline dance technique and open expression lent the choreography particular immediacy.

The Skirball’s shallow shoebox space, viewed widthwise, proved no particular challenge for the choreographer, although much of the pageant seemed to skew toward the stage right side of the room. Yet another excellent dance evening at the Skirball, where superb prior outings by Tere O’Connor and the great Eiko and Komo linger as memories.