

The Guardian

Fierce festival review - a daring whirl of theatrical thrills

Various venues, Birmingham Aided by hula hoops, raw chicken and animatronic dogs, the performers in this six-day series of shows embarked on a quest for emotional connections

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Communion, empathy, resistance and joy ... Writing in the programme of this year's beautifully curated Fierce festival, artistic director Aaron Wright said that these were the elements that characterised this six-day festival - and these four qualities were abundant in the performances I saw. As was, appropriately enough, a fierce sincerity.

Communion featured in Belgian artist Miet Warlop's astounding and exhilarating Ghost Writer and the Broken Hand Break. Warlop and two other performers whirled away while remaining in lit circles for 45 minutes. Its simple act of balance and velocity rendered extraordinary through repetition and duration, made all the more impressive with music and percussion that made me feel as if my blood was vibrating.

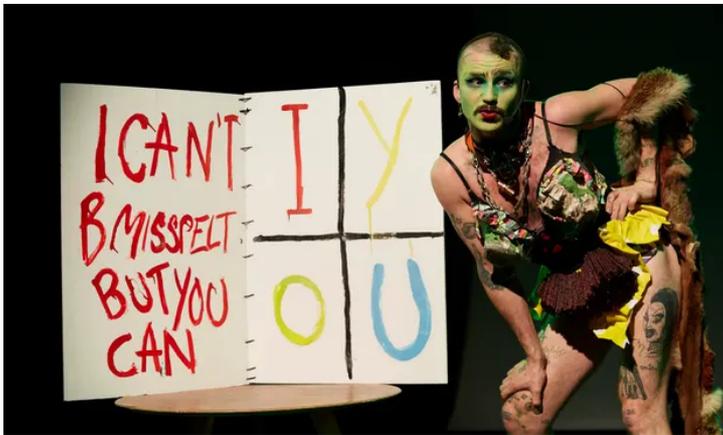


Balance and velocity ... Ghost Writer and the Broken Hand Break.
Photograph: Reinout Hiel

Gillie Kleiman and Greg Wohead's Familiar, with its focus on empathy, consisted of two works - Study in Significant Otherness created by Kleiman and performed by Wohead, and Dog Years, created by Wohead and performed by Kleiman. Aided by two animatronic dogs, it's a neat conceptual conceit, with both works to-ing and fro-ing around the impossibility of knowing everything about another person.

In the first part, Wohead performed a sequence of static canine gestures that evolved into a long sequence of movement under a dim red light. The second work was looser in tone and structure, with Kleiman parroting Wohead's words as they were spoken into her ear. As she repeatedly asserted that she was here to make a meaningful connection with us, there was a playful, tentative ambivalence about whether it's possible to fulfil such a promise.

Meanwhile, resistance was Lucy McCormick's theme. Offering a preview of her soon to be released narrative concept album, Life: Live! was a balls-to-the-wall skewering of the misogyny and exploitation that underpin popular culture. While McCormick moves and sings like the most glamorous of arena-filling pop princesses, her shonky-spectacular aesthetic is anything but: it is cold, wet and even humiliating. But it's all on her terms. This is no easy, ironic parody: it is extreme and often looks dangerous. Her fearless commitment to this contradiction is what makes McCormick's performances so thrilling.



Moment of joy: Oozing Gloop in The Gloop Show at Fierce festival.
Photograph: PR

Whether doused in paint and water, frozen meals and raw chicken, or hanging from the rafters, whipping the crowd into a frenzy, McCormick and her backup dancers could lead the revolution.

Finally, various moments of joy: Oozing Gloop in The Gloop Show, insisting on a better future as she hula-hooped; the care and precision with which names were spoken and choreographed in Mariana Valencia's moving, autobiographical Album; the moment when one child stretched out her arms and led her own dance for the first time in Nicola Gunn's Working With Children.

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