

Theater: Fuerza Bruta Loses Its "Wayra" With New Show

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WAYRA -- FUERZA BRUTA * 1/2 out of ****

DARYL ROTH THEATER

If you've never seen any non-traditional theater, no Cirque Du Soleil or the countless circus troupes that have come in its wake, if you've never been to a rave or a spectacle like Stomp and Blue Man Group, I suppose Wayra might have some modest appeal as novelty.

Actually, I'm a newbie, somehow never having been to a Fuerza Bruta event before. So even though this edition reportedly recycles quite a few stunts from previous FB shows of the past, it was all new to me. Nonetheless, the almost determined lack of imagination in each bit (calling them skits would be pushing it), the avoidance of almost anything resembling choreography or humor, the refusal to do anything other than the minimal makes the evening a joyless affair for all but the most un-jaded 17 year old.

It begins and ends with anonymous tribalistic, techno music followed by a group of performers who float over the crowd in a big clump, waving and yelling enthusiastically while swinging back and forth. Though there is nothing challenging in the stunts performed (this is not a display of gymnastic or acrobatic skills of any note), it does demand the cast be athletic and energetic and they certainly did their best to rouse the crowd into a fun atmosphere. Still, this bit set the tone. Like the worst Saturday Night Live skits of the past 20 years, it offers some sliver of an idea (in this case, the cast dressed in "regular" clothes swinging out over the crowd) but instead of developing the idea and coming up with twists or a way to up the ante, they just repeat it a few times and then stop.

Other bits occur. Two women doing wire work (arguably the most challenging of the evening) run across a curtained wall encircling the audience, screaming and yelling as if something momentous were about to occur. They do a few somersaults, each one running to one end and then the other. Like most everything else in the show and what you see in the trailer above, it looks vaguely cool for a moment until you realize...that's it.

The Man On The Treadmill is apparently a perennial feature and it comes the closest to what Wayra might have been if it actually tried to be something. Nothing actually happens but it does feel as if the skit progresses toward something. A man with a really bad commute is walking determinedly on a treadmill. It speeds up and he keeps going with Buster Keaton-like determination. Attendants place chairs and tables on the treadmill which he dodges while moving forward, always forward. People jump on the platform and he bumps and dodges past them. Eventually, a "brick wall" of cardboard boxes appears but he bursts through that too. He's shot in the chest, but even this doesn't stop him. On he goes. As with so much of the show, once I got the idea, I found more pleasure in observing how the technical team kept things running smoothly than in the actual skit. Still, this was definitely as close to art as they got, though it served mostly to put the rest of the show in stark contrast.

A pool interlude was a happy oasis in an evening that at least pretended to create an aura of tension and mayhem. In this bit, a plastic sort of swimming pool descends from the ceiling. We look up through the bottom and see a woman lit up. Again, it looks sort of cool. A paradise ensues, with four or five women playing around in the water, giggling and laughing and sliding. Here especially the lack of any visual imagination was painful.

Literally all they do is take turns splashing through a puddle in the middle, with one woman sliding in from one corner and then another sliding in from another corner. It's the sort of thing kids would do automatically and about just as much fun to watch.

Also, there was a creepy disconnect in this piece: it's both "innocent" and salacious. Either would be fine. But if you want it to be innocent, don't ask the women to wear clothing that's revealing and if you want them to be Playboy Playmate naughty, don't ask them to giggle like schoolgirls. Unless of course you're going for a vibe that would appeal to traveling businessmen. (And my female guest wondered if the show paid for all these women to get bikini waxed regularly.) Worst of all, while this skit was briefly interesting visually (most were), it went on a little too long with no change in the tedious staging. Then, remarkably, once it was over it essentially repeated itself all over again, far outstaying its welcome.

Another nadir was the dance-off that took place on an anonymous set wheeled out towards the audience. The unflagging cast was living it up, as if having the time of their lives, yelling and whooping and sort of dancing in unison. Still yelling, they tossed plastic chairs with abandon (but oh so carefully so the attendants could catch them or keep them from sliding towards the crowd and then feed the chairs back up to the cast). Then they went to town on cardboard boxes and flimsy squares that they smooshed over their heads as the tiles burst into confetti of sorts. All of this was clear after about 30 seconds, but it was the entire extent of the bit. They jump up and down, yell gleefully and toss cardboard boxes off the stage onto the floor and then dance around and do it again. A certain tension developed as you wondered if this could possibly be it for the stunt. It was.

It was topped when the show went to elaborate lengths to pull a plastic see-through ceiling of sorts over the audience with an opening or two so cast members could peek down at us (gleefully of course). A long tube was attached to one opening and the guy from the treadmill bit was lowered down into it while a fan created a sort of wind tunnel effect and bits of paper swirled around him. Despite the trappings, all this amounted to was a guy hanging motionless from the ceiling via a wire.

Yes, he was inserted into a sort of condom-like wind tunnel that blew his hair back, but really he was just hanging there for a few minutes, stationary and alone, doing nothing, accomplishing nothing, with only the illusion of something happening taking place around him, scraps of confetti twisting past our hero like the detritus from a parade that passed by long before we arrived.

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