

THE CONVERSATION

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Roy Vandervegt/Adelaide Festival

Guttered: a joyful immersion and subversion of expectations between the bowling lanes

Published: March 3, 2021 1.57pm AEDT

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Review: Guttered, directed by Michelle Ryan. Restless Dance Theatre for Adelaide Festival.

We are greeted at the entrance of Kingpin Norwood. Seasoned bowlers make a beeline for shoe hire while teens flock to the clanging siren call of arcade games. The line between real and theatrical is joyfully blurred as the interactive and immersive performance of Guttered begins.

Upon entering, we are required to show our palms for inspection as a small light dances across our hands. We are assessed: “You look like you’re good at supporting people. You can be on the cheer squad.”

Picked for our respective teams, we are directed towards couches at the end of each lane or a row of chairs towards the back of the room. These opening moments conjure a sense of conversation between audience and dancers.

Questions of who we are

Brightly printed score cards invite us to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 “How often do you feel like a winner?”. These are later perused by a dancer who reviews each score, assessing with a smile and a shrug before moving on to the next.

Glowing bowling bags emit recorded stories and are danced towards the audience, who are invited to lean in and listen. Lean in to the stories of triumph at the bowling alley. Lean in to the reflections of these dancers who face assumptions and judgements about their abilities as artists. Lean in to stories rejecting the stereotype of always being happy, or always being shy. One recording boldly proclaims: “I’m not shy, I’m wild!”



Two dancers — or two bowling balls? Roy Vandervegt/Adelaide Festival

Two dancers rest their chins on a bench and their heads become bowling balls in a syncopated moment of movement. From another angle, their bodies are projected shadows on the wall and the joyful moment is re-framed as a tender tussle between bodies. This duality is the first hint of the challenge director Michelle Ryan creates for the audience, inviting us to consider the possibilities of perspective.

Perhaps what we assume about an action might not be the case?

Two dancers are caressed and held. What begins as affection slowly morphs into control and possession. Hands are repeatedly drawn over faces and arms are continuously wrapped around bodies. The dancers can no longer move of their own free will.

 Two women embrace.

What begins as a gentle movement can morph into something else. Shane Reid/Adelaide Festival

When is well meaning helpfulness not helpful? When it denies someone the dignity of risk and opportunities to fail.

A poignant moment begins as a ramp is placed at the top of a lane. The bowler doesn't want the ramp. The worker insists. The bowler is emphatic, they do not want the ramp, get it out of my way. The worker insists. The ensuing repetition and tussle is squirm inducing. Can't the worker see she doesn't want the ramp? Can't they see this is insulting? Can't they see? Then the reflection hits square and centre — when have I not seen?

Ryan has created the perfect embodiment of the suffocation of “support”, subverting assumptions about helpfulness in the process.

Bowling ally as performer

It is a delight to see the architecture of the bowling alley used for performance. Sweeping sequences shared by the entire ensemble use the separated lanes to represent individuality and finding your own path, and later provide a grid like structure for unified movement.

Dancers bodies lie in the gutters, backs arch over ball chutes, shoes slide along the highly oiled wood. The familiar features of the bowling alley are transformed into theatrical co-performers.

This is no doubt a testament to the seamless design by Meg Wilson, evocative music soundscape by Jason Sweeney and nuanced lighting design by Geoff Cobham, working together to direct and guide the audiences' eyes throughout the performance. It is hard to fight the urge to jump up and join in. Luckily, we don't have to resist: members of the audience are periodically invited up for (COVID-safe) participation.

The ensuing cheers as balls crash into gutters and strikes are bowled create a thrilling sense of celebration.

Juxtaposing the energetic playfulness of the ensemble are a series of solos and duets. These moments punctuate the performance, offering up stories of love, self-determination and triumph.

 A man leans over a glowing bowling ball.

The balls are as much a part of this dance as the performers. Roy Vandervegt/Adelaide Festival

In one such moment, a solo dancer tenderly removes a glowing bowling ball from a bag and places it on the floor. In a moment of pure delight the ball begins to move, seemingly of its own volition. The dancer follows the path of the ball dutifully and, when it occasionally dips into the gutter, gently retrieves it, comforts it in an embrace, and returns it to the floor so it can continue its journey.

It is deceptively simple, and entirely compelling.

Guttered plays until March 14.