



# Magic Monkey Dance Company

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## nytheatre.com review

David Fuller · Jun 3, 2006

At first blush, Laboratory Theater's *Magic Monkey Dance Company* seems confusing: is this a dance concert or performance art? Yet, give it a few minutes and you will be enthralled by a story, the epic struggle of a real-life orangutan named Kusasi, as told through music, dance, sound, and text. At the core, the source is the PBS television show *Nature* and its episode "From Orphan to King," which chronicles the story of the orangutan Kusasi, born and orphaned in 1976, a part-time resident of the Borneo orangutan sanctuary Camp Leaky, and ultimately the king of a Borneo territory of orangutans that is being diminished by logging and the encroachment of humans.

Layered onto this is an exploration into Kusasi's "psychology" using a character from the HBO series *The Sopranos*, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, as his shrink. The text from the Kusasi-Dr. Melfi sessions is taken from actual dialogue from *The Sopranos*, plus additional text from Kafka's short story "Report to the Academy." The story is told through narration and simian dancing by four performers, Corey Dargel, Sheila Donovan, Oleg Dubson, and Alexis Macnab. This may seem a bit of a jungle jumble, but it is knitted together quite well by director Yvan Greenberg and the company in a clearly collaborative effort of high order.

The production ends abruptly with Dargel telling us that that is all they have for now (the program notes the last section as "in progress"). This work-in-progress feeling probably accounts for some odd loose ends. For one thing, there are two video monitors onstage facing away from the audience. What is their purpose? From my vantage point, I thought one monitor appeared to be showing the *Nature* documentary. Why? Were the dancers following the video with their dances? Using it for cues? Dargel, who mostly controlled sound while seated at a microphone and narrating, periodically fiddled with one of the video monitors while apparently hearing 90% of the audio output over an earphone. Again, why? If this techno-fidgeting was part of the performance, I found it simply distracting.

What Dargel was doing that was not distracting was playing sound cues and foley effects using a laptop, while simultaneously narrating the production and cuing the other actors, evincing a sort of keyboard virtuosity. Dargel in fact is amazing, keeping up a 70-minute narration on mike, cueing and teching as mentioned, leaping up to join the cast in certain dances, and voicing the English "translations" to Kusasi's therapy sessions with Dr. Melfi. Donovan is equally amazing as Dr. Melfi, helping to lead Kusasi through an emotional journey of discovery while also joining in the dancing as required. Macnab, as three very different female orangutans, and Dubson, as Kusasi, are both beyond amazing. Their simian assimilation is wonderful. They are both a large reason why the production is so enthralling—you really feel at times as if you are watching great apes in a jungle canopy. Their movements are enhanced by the simplicity of the set: three wires at chest level defining a triangular space, with green crepe paper attached. That's all the jungle we need to let our imaginations take flight.

I hope Laboratory Theater completes this piece. We are left with Kusasi ruling his domain on shaky grounds—what will happen? Then again, perhaps it should end with a cliffhanger. Certainly we stand now on an ecological precipice. Will humankind continue to alter orangutan habitat? Will the jungles disappear? Or will we make some hard decisions to effect positive change to our globe?

## Opened

Aug 11, 2006

## Closed

Aug 20, 2006

## Director

Yvan Greenberg

## Producer

Laboratory Theater