

A Breathless 'Blast!' of Pure Exhilaration

Theater Review
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U ntil science comes up with something better, nautical-ists must be satisfied with "Blas!" to keep them awake. Few are better qualified as truth in advertising, the motto of this troupe, than the members of this troupe, whose winning investigation of theater's raggedy show, with its defining impact.

Directed by artistic director James Mason out of Birmingham's weekly exception that of Indiana competitive drum corps, "Blas!" which began its limited Los Angeles premiere engagement at UCLA's Royce Hall on Wednesday, is ostensibly a blood relation of international sensation "Stomp" and "Beverly Hills."

Like those similarly unconfined, "Blas!" operates as a series of pure kinetic, explosive, narrative and meaning in fever of form and direction. Movement, music and design are amalgamated for the sake of doing so, with musical response the objective.

However, the parameters of "Blas!" are determined by the traditions of Irish clog dancing, the boundaries of "Stomp" by combining industrial materials and post-Action Gitter's street moves. Internal variations notwithstanding, both shows ex-

actly examine single disciplines in superlative extremes that "Blas!" although basically a celebration of the drum beat, is a multi-dimensional display of ensemble virtuosity approaching the superhuman.

Throughout a breathless two hours, all 34 touring company members prove world-class instrumentalists, dancers, gymnasts, jugglers and/or clowns, at once.

In the opening tangle of a single drum entering Mark Thompson's effective grid-patterned set, the scene is deceptively simple. Then a white-clad figure appears, proceeding to trace the unmistakable rhythmic underpinnings of Beethoven's "Fidelio" with head confidence.

Others join in, simultaneously playing pinpoint choreography and promoting a super-bowl halftime staged by the late Bob Fosse.

As additional drummers appear on the sides, the abridged reading builds to a frenzied, soaring, toad-like rhapsody.

In the closing finale, Francis Lechner's "The Blue Bird" (written by Leonid Brezhnev and music by Dmitri Shostakovich) is a theatrical "Core Officer" Krupnik from "The Side Show," done here in an operatic Rubik Goldberg turn. The clockwork precision compasses the entire venue from again to history with dazzling aplomb.

The star is the ensemble cast of



The 34-person company performs its routines on a grid-patterned set.



whom are college-age, all of whom are amazing. Adam Rapa's stratospheric blues trumpet stands out, as does Nicholas E. Angelis and Christopher "Kit" Chatham's snare drum sorcery in the show-stopping "Battery Battle."

Chuck Mangione's "Land of Make Believe" benefits from soloist Frank Sullivan (flugelhorn), Amy M. Sanchez (French horn) and Matthew A. Barks (tuba). Deborah Burgess and Jeremiah L. Huber are notable featured dancers.

This heroic crew's maneuvers are expertly overseen by directors George Pirney and Jonathan Vanderkirk, sharing choreographic credit with Tim Moore. Musical director James Prime's arrangements soundlessly take us everywhere from euphorium to didgeridoo.

Thompson's triple set acts as an eardrum for his primary-accented monochromatic costumes and

Hugh Vanston's lighting is a breathtaking show in itself, from backdrops to black lights. This is specialized stuff, including the liberties Tom Moore's ultra-hyped amplification borders on euphorium even in the grandly choreographed "Simile Gulls" theme from Captain's "Appalachian Spring."

"Blas!" is "Blas!" truly substantial beneath the glittering facade with a sense of repetition developing early in 1972.

For all the thrills, it is also exhilarating, like an especially rare roller-coaster ride, as apt a simile for this other color show.

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