

City Pages

Small Confederacy of Dancers

Lisa D'Amour exhumes eccentric New Orleans sister act

By Quinton Skinner

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"New Orleans embraces its eccentrics," says playwright Lisa D'Amour about the subjects of her latest, Obie-grabbing show, presented locally as part of the Walker-sponsored Out There series. "It's cut off from the rest of the country--and proud of it."

Flora and Piroska Gellert were Romanian-born Hungarian sisters who immigrated to New Orleans in the 1920s and embarked on an oddball career as "international dancers" Nita and Zita. For decades, they stitched their own flamboyant costumes and mixed impressionistic dance moves with athletic contortion in various French Quarter venues. Once age took its toll, they became quasi-recluses and world-class eccentrics, staying together and transforming their house into a monument to their totally insular brand of fabulousness.

"I heard about them in '95 or '96," says D'Amour, who currently lives in New York but whose Twin Cities tent stakes are still planted in the ground (her cell phone has a 612 area code). "I was in Austin doing an MFA in playwriting when a friend came across their stuff in vintage stores. She gave me a postcard with them in peacock feathers, staring at me with these really commanding gazes. I said, 'We're going to have to make a play about them.'"

The resulting show combines dance numbers with a surreal Q&A format, in which the endearing Nita and the haughty, imperious Zita field questions from a clueless interviewer. Stars Katie Pearl and Kathy Randels evince a good deal of charm and intrigue, as well as eye-popping physicality and symbiosis in their dancing and intricately choreographed gestures.

"These sisters were so psychically and physically connected," says D'Amour, mentioning a similar connection between herself and Pearl, who were born on the same day in the same year. "They weren't twins, but in Nita & Zita they finish each other's sentences. They almost share a central nervous system."

By the time they were both dead, in the mid-'90s, the full extent of Nita and Zita's weirdness went public when their house was opened to outsiders. "They had painted

every room different wild colors," says D'Amour. "They painted all their furniture red with silver spider webs, with polka dot walls in different colors. All their archways had beaded curtains, with showgirl photos lining the walls and their different costumes hanging up."

In the play, the two sisters are firmly embedded in their mutually created world. They argue over the details but can agree that when trekking through their decaying neighborhood to the market, it is best to wear full costume and bring your own shopping cart. While I've only been able to see the show on videotape (an entirely frustrating medium--of the stage and the moving picture, rarely should the two mix), the show's striking blend of sisterly rapport and otherworldly imagery makes for a fully realized cocoon of fascinating strangeness.

D'Amour remembers the creation of the show with Pearl and Randels as rife with the sisters' presence. "I'm not a superstitious person, but the supernatural energy present in the making of this piece was uncanny," she says. "There was a sense that they had found us, and were wanting us to tell their story."

During research, D'Amour went so far as to seek out a psychic to dig up more information. "We visited their graves in New Orleans," the playwright adds. "It was a weird thing--whenever we'd hit a wall, we'd visit their graves and a new avenue would open up. They gave us a really hard time about what we were allowed to say, and see. Their diva energy has persisted long after their deaths. And if there's any city where the ghosts would be in control, it's New Orleans."

Polka-dotted spectral contortionists to the last, the story of Nita and Zita, in D'Amour's capable hands, manages to redefine the idea of haunting. Things that go bump in the night, after all, rarely do so in skin-tight outfits while standing on their heads.