

AfterWind: The dance about a terrorist attack

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Off-Leash Area is known for absorbing hybrids of dance and theater.

A dance about a terrorist attack might seem like the last thing you'd want to see right now, but Off-Leash Area's *AfterWind* succeeds as a way of processing this madness together.

Meditative and searching, the piece addresses our present circumstances while also exploring broader themes of mortality and fear.

Off-Leash Area's Jennifer Ilse and Paul Herwig are known for their absorbing hybrids of dance and theater, and *AfterWind* demonstrates once again the power of their partnership. Both perform throughout the piece — along with three other dancers — as their activities run along different but complementary paths.

Herwig, as scenic designer, has transformed Savage Umbrella's *SPACE* into a sculptural installation, with the audience sitting on four sides of a square wooden structure that serves as dance surface for Ilse, Kaori Kenmotsu, Jesse Neumann Peterson, and Darrius Strong.

Herwig begins the show encased in a windowed box, sanding away at a piece of wood as shavings fall to the floor like sands through the hourglass.

He's playing, the program informs us, "Death Anxiety" itself. As the piece begins and the dancers, their workaday lives upended, begin contorting their bodies in shock and pain, Herwig bangs on the sides of the box and eventually frees himself — emerging as a spectral figure who wanders around the space fidgeting and mumbling.

What follows is a sort of fever dream of death, at once both frenzied and calm. The performers are largely silent, with the soundtrack provided by a Craig Harris soundscape that may be the real star of the show.

Reminiscent of avant-garde tape experiments from the mid-20th century, Harris's score of rumblings and distant moans is strange and fascinating. Conventional music would also have worked for this piece, but Harris's sound creates a distinctive experience.

As the dancers carry on — silently climbing the walls, inverting their bodies, touchingly comforting one another — Herwig perambulates the space, eventually revealing additional set elements that become stages for him to dramatize different aspects of the struggle with death's reality. Ilse and Herwig don't try to tell a story. Instead, they use very specific details of certain attacks as reminders of those who have been lost.

In one particularly affecting moment, Herwig unpacks a series of suitcases while quietly repeating the words of a flight attendant caught in the initial surprise of a terrorist attack. Herwig's demeanor — somber, reverent, and distressed — makes the moment work as a ritual of remembrance.

The show's creators don't just stop at sadness. The show ends on an eerily pointed note, with Herwig ascending a podium atop a gaping mouth of broken-board teeth. There, he quietly and insistently delivers a short speech that mixes the words of Donald Trump with those of George Wallace (and others), suggesting the dark roads that beckon when fear rears its head.