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Arts

LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Soaring, Climbing and Seeking Connection

Two high-flying shows blend circus with dance in feats of perfect equilibrium.

THE SONG IS INDISTINCT at first, as the barefoot man descends from the ceiling in hazy darkness. And when we can make out the tune — “Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do” — it’s almost spooky in its old-timey sweetness, at odds with the spare, forbidding space we see before us.

This is the start of the French director-choreographer Raphaëlle Boitel’s stark and stunning “When Angels Fall,” a blend of circus and dance set in a mechanized dystopia whose inhabitants yearn for human connection — a bicycle built for two.

But the main pairing in this exquisitely designed and surprisingly moving work, receiving its American premiere at Peak Performances in Montclair, N.J., is between light and the human form. Illumination (by Tristan Baudoin, who also designed the set) is often kept to a minimum, all the better to see individual beams, like the sharp light that silhouettes the jerky, Chaplinesque movement of that barefoot man (Loïc Leviel).

On the capacious stage of the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, “When Angels Fall” borrows much from the language of film — the scope of the audience’s vantage; the largeness of scale; the emotion-stirring music (by Arthur Bissot), which often sounds like it could underscore a silent movie.

Yet it’s the liveness of the performers that lends this piece urgency. Encased in drab suits — some of them amusingly animate, turning their wearers into marionettes — they struggle to escape. (Costumes are by

CONTINUED ON PAGE C2



Alba Faivre in “When Angels Fall,” directed and choreographed by Raphaëlle Boitel, at Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, in New Jersey. The show’s illumination is often kept to a minimum.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

Lilou Hérin, rigging and machinery by Nicolas Lourdelle.)

In this regimented world, it is a shock the first time someone throws off a jacket and we see an expanse of flesh. But physicality is insistent here, and so is the human spirit, which finds suspenseful, exalted expression as one woman (Alba Faivre, daring with a rope) climbs and falls and climbs in an attempt to get out.

But it’s in stillness that Ms. Boitel finds the power to break our hearts. Off in a corner, a small figure (Emily Zuckerman) crouches, enraptured. With her gaze trained offstage, she is bathed in warm light, holding a whispered conversation from which she refuses to be dragged away.

When Angels Fall

Through Sunday at Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair, N.J.; 973-655-5112, peakperfs.org
Running time: 1 hour 10 minutes.