



Gandini Juggling's love letter to the choreographer opened the London International Mime Festival

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Life review — Gandini Juggling's charming tribute to Merce Cunningham

Donald Hutera

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★★★★☆

Subtitled *A Love Letter to Merce Cunningham*, the world premiere of Gandini Juggling's *Life* launched this year's edition of the London International Mime Festival in high style. Lasting an hour, and featuring a casually clad cast of nine plus one live musician (the Pulitzer prizewinning American composer and

vocalist Caroline Shaw), the compact performance has been assembled with enough unpretentious charm, skill, wit and warmth to please those who do or do not know of the work of that [late, great American choreographer](#).

Sean Gandini and Kati Ylä-Hokkala, the company co-founders, have been exploring the interface between dance and juggling for decades. Their wide-ranging interests have yielded a handful of smartly entertaining productions, including one focused on the rigorous geometry of south Asian classical dance, and another drawing upon the expansive, messy “dramedy” of the dance-theatre guru Pina Bausch. In *Life* they convey a deep appreciation for Cunningham’s cool yet entrancing complexities in a manner that is light, layered and lively.

Although the title is derived from Cunningham’s pioneering work with the three-dimensional software package known as LifeForms, *Life* has nothing to do with digital expression and everything to do with bodies in space and time — a key concept in live performance, especially dance, and one that Cunningham investigated with diligent brilliance for more than half a century. The show commences with a delightfully simple, short and straightforward lecture/demonstration: as Ylä-Hokkala juggles various combinations of a handful of balls, Gandini — a tireless and engaging enthusiast — compares each basic rhythmic pattern to music, from waltz to pop to techno.

Life then slips into a shifting series of interactions and encounters between people and balls, rings and juggling pins or clubs. All credit to a cast who appear as adept at movement as they are at manipulating objects. One of the key players is Jennifer Goggans, an erstwhile member of Cunningham’s company for a dozen years. *Life* marks her professional juggling debut after only two years training. No sore thumb she.

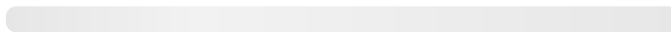
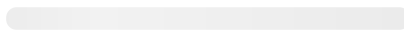
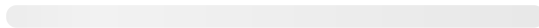
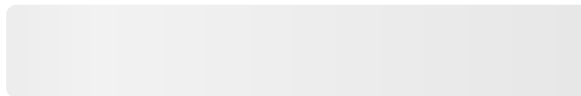
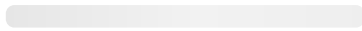
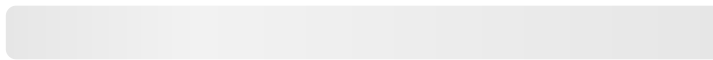
Several others in the Gandini ensemble are dance-trained. What impresses is their collective ability to adopt the quirky, formalist grace, often off-centre balances and avian-like strides of Cunningham’s signature style while keeping or passing their battery of juggling props in the air. If the performance doesn’t quite sustain itself, the fusion of forms — maybe a tad too smoothly accompanied by Shaw’s music, delivered via laptop

and microphone and violin from an upstage corner — still by and large works a treat. A fine start to a festival that this year focuses on British-made work.

To January 15. Festival continues to February 6;
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