

## Haunting look at mental illness, laid bare on the streets

Written by Michael Upchurch: May 9, 2013



Choreographer-performer Ezra Dickinson, right, performs his piece “Mother for you I made this,” which combines dance and street theater on the streets of downtown Seattle.

Nothing can prepare you for a phone call from someone close to you who, in the course of the conversation, casually mentions that she is homeless.

That’s what happened to Seattle dancer-choreographer Ezra Dickinson at age 18, when he was a student at Cornish College of the Arts. His mother, a schizophrenic who’d been in and out of institutions for most of Dickinson’s life, told him she was living on the streets.

“Mother for you I made this” is his attempt to convey her plight and those of people like her. Combining dance and street theater on the streets of downtown Seattle near the Greyhound station, Dickinson has no trouble luring you into the raw, delusional turmoil of his mother’s world. His own uncertain anguish over how to help her comes through loud and clear, too. Both the street setting and the headphone audio guide he uses are peculiarly suited to conjuring his mother’s experience. The audio guide has its practical side, ensuring you can hear the text, sounds and music he’s assembled with composer Paul Walsh. But it also stands in as a kind of auditory hallucination, cutting you off from the passers-by around you, letting you hear something that they can’t hear.

The slow progress he forces you to take through downtown alleyways and public plazas — places that pedestrians normally pass obviously — also sets you apart, sharpening your awareness of how some unfortunate souls actually inhabit these corners of the city.

Then there’s Dickinson’s movement itself. To see him dance with such lithe, measured, stylized grace down a sidewalk (he was trained at Pacific Northwest Ballet School) is to be reminded of

how the average urban dweller's inner alarm bells instantly go off at the sight of anyone doing anything dramatic or unusual on a downtown street.

Some pedestrians studiously ignore him. Others are fascinated. Still others are wary of the way he stops and windmills his arms, makes turning leaps in the air — or simply stands stock-still in a doorway. Dickinson's uses of unexpected props, masks and a hallucinatory video (briefly projected in a dim back alley) are just as striking.

The only weak link in this hour long show is its "libretto," which sometimes spells out its message too baldly. It works best when Dickinson seizes on a cluster of phrases and repeats them with varying expression, using and reusing the words until they seem to disintegrate into nonsense syllables.

In the program, Dickinson points people in need toward resources. It seems only right to list them here: National Alliance on Mental Illness Washington [namiwa.org](http://namiwa.org), Stand Up for Mental Health ([www.standupformentalhealth.com](http://www.standupformentalhealth.com)) and Psychosis Sucks ([www.psychosissucks.ca](http://www.psychosissucks.ca)).