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'Orbit' searches for love and a real connection

- Rachel Howard, Special to The Chronicle
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What makes Erika Shuch's work so arresting isn't the way she intuitively melds movement and theater, or the knack she has for attracting brilliant collaborators, or the Gen Y appeal of her slouchy, all-too-human performers. What's made this still-young choreographer a standout since she emerged in San Francisco six years ago is her childlike audacity in the face of big questions.

Shuch is a maker of metaphors, an existential explorer whose characters consider their place in the galaxy through poetic symbols. When Shuch's ideas get away from her, the product can be ponderous. But when her philosophical free association focuses on flesh-and-blood relationships, the results can be utterly disarming.

"Orbit," which just opened a three-week run at Intersection for the Arts, is mostly a case of the latter. It is profound but not pretentious, spectacularly clever and arguably Shuch's best work yet.

The metaphor this time is the search for extraterrestrial life, examining the human need for connection and the high odds against truly achieving it. Shuch and fellow cast member Danny Wolohan rush onstage, kissing madly, then repel one another. A voice-over tells us that "Orbiting is missing the target. One object doesn't see or feel the effects of the other object" -- a concept reinforced by the bright bull's-eye adorning the side of Shuch's dress.

The richness with which Shuch is able to deepen the metaphor is dazzling. Shuch's character soon tells us that she's been sending signals into space, and in short order (and punchy dialogue) we learn about exo-planets and the luminosity of stars, about light-emitting beetles and the statistical improbability that a signal sent into space will ever make contact. Shuch parcels out her symbols in potent lines and leaves them ample room to resonate. The choreography has moments of simple magic. Shuch and Wolohan have an early duet in which he lifts her feet to the wall and bounces her against it like an astronaut bounding on the moon. Soon Melanie Elms appears as a vampiric alien (it's the show's best performance, both sexy and funny), leading a chorus of sci-fi visitors.

Shuch was fortunate early in her career to team with music director and vocal coach Dwayne Calizo. For "Orbit," he and sound designer Daveen DiGiacomo adapt everything from Snow White's "Some Day My Prince Will Come" to "Blue Moon," which becomes a

laugh-out-loud tango for Elms and her cohorts.

Shuch's steady collaborator Sean Riley did the smart set design: skewers of books, lamps and televisions hang from the ceiling, sliding back and forth to effectively carve the venue's cramped space. Ishan Vernallis contributed the video design, which includes some effects too surprising to be revealed here.

Despite all these assets and a solid conceptual footing, "Orbit" does have a few pitfalls. The hourlong piece is most emotionally involving when rooted in Shuch and Wolohan's relationship. Will they connect? We want to know, and a tender duet feels immensely satisfying. But instead of ending there, the piece hiccups through more disconnected episodes.

Wolohan, an actor with theater company Campo Santo, could stand to dial down his plentiful bombastic moments. A bellowing bulldog of a man, he seems more cosmologically troubled than concerned with whether things with Shuch will work out. Their chemistry suffers.

Still, even as "Orbit" sputters in its second half, the occasions for laughter and wonder keep coming. Like so much of Shuch's work, "Orbit" wants to take on the meaning of the universe. Its scope becomes a bit too vast, but Shuch's questions definitely connect.

Orbit: Through Aug. 5. Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia St. (between 15th and 16th), San Francisco. Tickets: \$9-\$40, sliding scale. Call (415) 626-3311 or go to www.theintersection.org.

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