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DANCE REVIEW

## Antic and frantic, 'Trolley Dances' are good for a lift

By Janice Steinberg  
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Just going to “Trolley Dances” is an adventure. The trolleys are speedy and red. The urban safari, presented by Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theater, reveals hidden parts of San Diego, like the Mission Valley Preserve – who knew what lushness lay beyond the parking lot of the YMCA? And ordinary objects, like a drab fire escape, pop into your awareness, as in a Zen exercise on seeing the world with new eyes.

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

Sarah Larson (left) performed in “Life,” a complex piece by choreographer Terry Wilson that is part of “Trolley Dances.”

Then there's the dancing, six pieces performed near Metropolitan Transit District stops. In the 10th annual “Trolley Dances,” which opened on Saturday and continues next weekend, Isaacs and a bicoastal group of guest choreographers respond with wit and imagination to sites ranging from the riverside preserve to a historic building in Old Town.

And the strongest work – **by Terry Wilson** and Monica Bill Barnes – goes beyond cleverness to make artistic statements of poignancy and depth.

Wilson's “Life” begins with what at first seems a slice of life – a ragged street person gesturing as if to fend off intruders as you approach the San Diego River south of Fashion Valley. But the man is dancer Jesus Ponce, and to a yearning Boccherini cello air, 10 ragged dancers shift from wary isolation to delicate partnering, even forming a flock and supporting one another in lifts.

### “Trolley Dances”

**Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theater**

**When:** Tours leave hourly 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

**Where:** Hazard Center Trolley Station, corner of Hazard Center Drive and Frazee Road

**Tickets:** \$30 general admission, \$10 students, \$20 seniors

**Phone:** (619) 225-1803

**Online:** sandiegodancetheater.org

Not everything is pretty in this complex dance by Wilson, a San Diego artist who devotes most of her talent to teaching but has a rich choreographic voice. The striking Sarah Larson throws in shoulder twitches. And in a moment that combines the beautiful and the absurd, two men push Christine Doan in a shopping cart, while the others scurry around them like a *corps de ballet*.

Absurdity and transcendence also are juxtaposed in Barnes' piece. New Yorker Barnes has done several memorable "Trolley" pieces, usually involving water, and in "Sinking Again," 10 women line up at the edge of a swimming pool at the Morena Vista apartment complex.

Cool customers, the women wear little black dresses, big sunglasses and vacant expressions. Occasionally one carefully removes her heels, takes a step into the pool, and mumbles along with Elvis Presley's emotion-drenched "Let It Be Me."

Gradually they get wetter, doing goofy pedestrian moves – miming inserting a false tooth – and odd partnering, like holding another dancer's forehead. It's all silly, and suddenly it's profound. To Willie Nelson's "Falling in Love Again," one woman in each pair floats on her back while her partner tenderly cradles her, and you realize that all along, getting in the water was a metaphor for risking intimacy, and Barnes hooked you with sly wit, then sneaked up and touched your heart.

While the dances by Barnes and **Wilson** are the gold in this year's "Trolley Dances," there's plenty to enjoy in the pure humor of Isaacs' "Rolling Luggage Carts" and in "Ode to a Cowboy" by Katie Stevinson-Nollet.

In "Rolling Luggage Carts," 10 exuberant dancers swirl and hoist and swing wheeled suitcases. A repeat from the first "Trolley Dances," the piece took place at the Santa Fe Depot but may be moved for this weekend.

Stevinson-Nollet, who directs the Full Force Dance Theatre in Connecticut, created a fantasy of swaggering gunslingers and saloon gals at the Machado Stewart Museum in Old Town. The narrative feels predictable, but a bit with the dancers bouncing on their heels to Johnny Cash makes you want to yell *yee-ha!*

"Alice Lost in Fire Escape Land" by Anthony Rodriguez gets off to a beguiling start, with Angel Villalobos hopping along the trolley platform like a demented rabbit to lead viewers to the adjacent fire escape. Once we get there, though, there's a lot of running up and down, but not much coherence.

And it's simply hard to see Isaacs' "Untitled," with viewing restricted by the logistical challenge of squeezing 100 people into half a dozen sites in the Mission Valley Preserve.

Of what I caught, a section with eight dancers doing unison Tai Chi moves looked meditative and lovely.

Speaking of logistics, this is one of the longer “Trolley Dances,” taking a good three hours, and most of the dances are outdoors. You’ll want sunscreen, a hat and water. You might also want to bring a snack, or, in the spirit of urban exploration, duck out of your tour and finish with the next group, after exploring Old Town or Little Italy for lunch.

*A documentary about the making of last year's “Trolley Dances” will be shown on KPBS-TV at 9 p.m. Tuesday and at 3 a.m. Thursday.*

Janice Steinberg is a San Diego dance critic.