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No apologies needed for Goode's fine company

By Heidy Weiss
Dance Critic

Choreographer Joe Goode made a brief, unpretentious apology to his audience Thursday night as his company was about to open its engagement at the Dance Center of Columbia College. He seemed to feel that his work was not quite serious enough to justify an evening out during wartime, yet he also suggested that laughter could be a much-valued tonic. And so it was as his company of first-rate dancer-actors, the Joe Goode Performance Group, delivered its quirky tales of self-analysis and contemporary myth-making in two beautifully danced and wonderfully droll pieces.

Goode's troupe is the last of three San Francisco-based ensembles presented by the Dance Center in recent weeks as part of its "Into the West" festival. And like the two companies that preceded it here, the work on view (in this case choreographed in collaboration with the performers) is an intriguing blend of dance and spoken text.

In the opening piece, "What the Body Knows," which is set to a richly nuanced score by Beth Custer, five "characters" spin their neuroses in offbeat ways. At the center of the work is Elizabeth Burritt, and open-faced dancer with the breezy manner of a suburban soccer mom, who tells us she suffers from an excess of empathy for others. Brought up to be a nurturer, and perhaps kidding

herself that she is, she explains her condition as she sits at a table in front of a tiny video camera that projects her richly expressive and sweetly comic face on a giant screen.

She is not alone in her neuroses

Later, at the same table, we find the lean, dark-haired dancer Felipe Barrueto-Cabello stiffly holding a bowl of Cheerios while his tiny, fearless partner, Marit Brook-Kothlow (in a midnight blue wig), explains how hungry she is for some show of passion. Her fantasy seems to come true as the two break into a breathtaking, superbly danced duet—at once balletic and gymnastic, and involving some tabletop maneuvers that skip on the edge of danger. The bravura choreography bears Goode's trademark—split-leg, upside-down lifts that make the dancers appear to be suspended in air for a few seconds.

Another scene involves the uneasy relationship between a pair of gay men—one, danced by Marc Morozumi, more sexually promiscuous than the other, who talks about his emotionally triggered problem with eczema, and the other, danced by Vong Phrommala, who plays the more domestic half of the couple and carries six whistling teakettles onstage. Completing this neurotic lineup is Jennifer Wright Cook, who also suggests that she was bred to be cute and sweet, but can't quite square the image with her inner reality.

The second half of the program is devoted to "Mythic, Montana," Goode's version of the Sherwood Anderson classic "Winesburg, Ohio," with a touch of the Coen Brothers' film "Fargo" tossed in. This highly engaging portrait of a dead-end town is an absolute charmer, and is charmingly evoked by designer Richard Olmstead's miniature Main Street set, complemented by Meg Neville's witty costumes.

Goode serves as the acerbic narrator—a street sweeper in Mythic, a nothing-ever-happens-here town where, of course, the inhabitants are seething with unrealized passions and dreams. Taking his cue from the Greek and Roman myths in his limning of personalities, he gives us a Gothlike teenage self-dramatizer named Psyche (deliciously played and danced by Brook-Kothlow) and a blithely self-loving young soccer player named Narcissus (delightful work by Morozumi), who is wildly desired by everyone and oblivious to any desire beyond his self-contentment. Along with a variety of other character who both talk and move in easy synchrony, there is an ensemble of Chicago-based dancers that serves as a chorus, embodying the waves of feeling generated by all these clashing egos.

In a particularly stunning scene, the dancers, clad in red bathing suits, seem to literally swim in a sea of passion. It's a wonderful image, and just one of the many that make "Mythic, Montana" a fine place to visit.