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Girl Power

by Syd Steinhardt

show reviewed February 2, 2002

Goga, which stands for "girl on girl action" - an unfortunate acronym that conjures up images of late-night cable access entertainment - bills itself as "a powerful and positive organic theatrical force" whose "energy and artistic vision has proven contagious, inspiring women across the globe to form their own goga groups." Obviously, modesty is in short supply with these self-styled mistresses of the of the improv universe.

Meeting such high expectations would be quite a feat. It's hard to imagine how anyone could. So one would be wise to ignore the bombast, and concentrate on the fact that goga has plenty of talent to burn.

Each of the four cast members - Annie Figenshu, Topping Hagerty, Karen Herr, and Karen Wight performed this evening - can act, sing, and dance. That's a refreshing change from most improv groups, where individual members pride themselves on doing their stock shtick week after week.

For one expecting a show based on the tenets of Spolin or Johnstone, goga surprises. There are no scraps of paper to write down suggestions for the players, nor does the troupe come out and explain what is about to transpire. If one is waiting for an opportunity to shout out a suggestion, he or she will be disappointed. Instead, the members of goga play off one another as they plunge headlong into a continuous show that incorporates movement, music and comedy.

Though jarring at first, it works,

goga

★ ★ ★ out of 5

Featuring Adrienne Frost, Annie Figenshu, Topping Hagerty, Karen Herr, Kellee Santiago and Karen Wight
 Artistic Director: Jay Rhoderick
 Music: Hector Coris
 Tech: Paul Jones
 Saturday Feb. 2, 9, 16 and March 2 at 10:30 p.m.
 Bank Street Theatre, 155 Bank Street
 For info and reservations, call 212-560-6596

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owing much to the charming presence of the four cast members. Their movement skills are on display at the outset, when goga bounds onstage to pulsating house music,



Clockwise from upper right: Topping Haggerty, Karen Wight, Annie Figenishu, Kellee Santiago, Karen Herr crisscrossing the stage in what seems to be an improvised dance number with each member taking a turn changing the movement. After a few minutes of this, they head into a show of unconnected vignettes. One can take this to mean that goga trusts its audience to believe that its show has not been worked out beforehand. In that way, goga plays up, rather than down, to its audience's level of intelligence and sophistication.

Depending upon how long it takes to figure out what is supposed to happen onstage, goga was consistently witty, if not out loud funny. On this night, many of the jokes involved alcoholism, which can be funny but can also betray a lack of imagination. It is worth noting, however, that the goga girls did not fall into the trap of going for obvious jokes about bodily functions and sex.

The main weaknesses of the show were the transitions between vignettes. At one point, a character was brought back from an earlier scene, which made for some delightful repartee and situations. Since that was the only such occasion, the audience could be forgiven for wondering if it were accidental, convenient or intentional.

It was also refreshing to behold improvisers actually listening to one another. This show lacked much of the cacophony of many troupes, whose members want to outdo one another for the laugh lines. The performers did not seem rushed. They allowed scenes to develop. The fact that they maintained their collective and individual composure despite scenes that were veering out of control is a testament to their confidence, their skill and their direction.

The biggest mistake of the evening was the troupe's unfortunate decision to hire Bayne Gibby as a warm-up act. On this night, goga's respect for its form and its audience clashed with the attitude of Ms. Gibby. Her mercifully short three-song set would

have been more at home at a drunken sorority party.

No matter. Goga showed faith in itself and its audience. While not turning in a flawless performance, goga was engaging. In time, they may be able to justify all those superlatives that they use to describe themselves.