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ARTS & LEISURE

## Plucky and Poignant: 'Powersuits' connects with comedy

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By Elsie Lynn Parini

Two women — sometimes wearing shiny purple bikinis — will take the mainstage at Town Hall Theater in Middlebury on Friday, April 3, for a vibrant, sharp comic duet that will have you screaming with laughter. Promise.

Middlebury College professors Michole Biancosino (theater) and Lida Winfield (dance) previewed a few of the vignettes from the show, "Powersuits," during an interview last week. "We peel off layers," explained Biancosino, who was puffed-up in at least four, layered outfits standing at the front of the Mahaney Dance Theater stage. "Then we put them back on." All of the outfits signal something — suits signal power, money, manliness; ties mean the office... Then there's a red dress, red cheerleading outfits, maxi-pad filled elegant wings, and, yes, purple bikinis... There are a lot of outfit changes (on set).

"Our wrestling singlets are the base we return to," Winfield added. That's right, wrestling singlets. They're blue.

As Winfield and Biancosino peel on and off these layers of different personas, the audience is invited to critique normative gender roles, laugh at stereotypes of authority and see beauty as absurd. The hour-long show brings belly laughs while the actors simultaneously embody the alienation that comes from capitalist grind culture.

It all started about a year and a half ago, when Winfield and Biancosino agreed to work on a Winfield brought a scene of slow-motion cheering; Biancosino brought a script from an office scene she had written. "The idea was that Lida had this positive cheering thing and then it morphed into anger,"

Biancosino remembered. "The movement evokes cheering at a kid's sports game... but also maybe protests or rallies?" "The physicality (of cheering) is really similar if you take it out the context," Winfield said. "Aml cheering for you or speaking against you?" "The line is really thin once you have fervor," Biancosino agreed.

The duo explores the huge picture of the lived experience through multiple different perspectives that start with a simple premise and then stretch into a territory of unanswerable questions.

"We take something that is pretty truthful and blow it up," Biancosino said raising her arms up and over her head with 10 fingers spread wide. "We enlarge it somehow, so you can see what's there, but without telling people what to think about it or what it is. There's a way that is fun and comedic, but also actually pretty serious in the message that people can get out of it." Is this serious feminist art?

Yes, at one level. They are tackling some heavy topics.

No, at another level. Explosive laughter is more than welcome.

"This is a joyful duet," Biancosino said. "It's always appropriate to laugh!"

"Given how difficult so many things in the world are," Winfield acknowledged, "this isn't about laughing to avoid those difficult things, this is a different way to have commentary on the world that is a useful way to engage together so that we are building connections and community."

Come expand your mind and laugh. Laugh at these women attempting the lift-scene from “Dirty Dancing.” Laugh at these women putting on lipstick. Laugh at their over-exuberance, their exaggerated movements, their Dorito-dance, and their salad show-down. And perhaps your thoughts will expand or venture into experimental territory? Or not, that’s welcome too. That land of uncertainty is familiar to Biancosino and Winfield.

“We both teach this class here (at Middlebury College) called ‘Creative Process,’” Biancosino said. “We encourage students to figure out what they’re doing after they’ve done something... Like, take an idea, play with it, and then let go of the original idea. For me ‘Powersuits’ has really embodied that creative process practice.”

The two have tried *a lot* and continue to let meaning arise from the process.

“We have an idea then do it. Have another idea, do it,” Winfield shared. “Opposed to the process where we might brainstorm 15 ideas and pick the one we think will be the ‘best one’ — because that just doesn’t exist.”

Another rule that the team found early in the process, is that they don’t compete.

“We decided pretty early on that everything we do is to help each other and support each other,” Biancosino said. “That’s a rule that we discovered — and we like it. We’re not setting up this thing you see so often of women trying to outdo each other... Consider what it means that we’re a team and we help each other. That’s an undercurrent throughout the show. We’re always working in tandem.”

It wouldn’t be out of the question to find the comparisons between the two; after all they come from what seem like very different trainings (Biancosino in theater and Winfield in dance).

“But neither of us are that simple,” Winfield said with a sparkling smile. “In that same spirit of supporting each other, we are taking our different skill sets and different strengths bringing them to our collaborations. That shows in each of the sections.

“‘Powersuits’ feels like a middle,” Winfield explained. “It’s not really dance and it’s not really theater — it’s a combination of so many different things.”

Including you.

The show will open with an ‘80s and ‘90s dance-mix cocktail hour starting at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, April 3. Winfield and Biancosino will take the stage at 7:30 p.m., and then host a talkback immediately following the show.

Winfield reiterated that she and Biancosino are just “exploring.” And they invite everyone to come, connect and share space with others who care about “all the ways you can use art to explore life.”

Michole Biancosino monologues during a sketch in “Powersuits,” while Lida Winfield dances around her. This show will kick off with an ‘80s-‘90s dance party to get everyone loosened up before the show at Town Hall Theater in Middlebury on Friday, April 3.

**Michole Biancosino** is the co-founding artistic director of Project Y Theatre Company, where she has developed and directed new work in Washington, D.C., New York City and internationally for over 25 years. With Project Y, she has led various professional productions, as producer, director, creator and writer. Credits included the long-running shows “Trump Lear” (co-created and directed) and the award-winning “David Carl’s Celebrity One-Man Hamlet” (co-created and directed), both of which toured regionally and performed at Edinburgh Fringe, as co-productions with Richard Jordan Productions (UK), “The Pleasance,” and “Underbelly.” She directs solo artist Peter Michael Marino’s long-running solo shows “Show Up!” and “Show Up Kids!” which is now running in Spanish- and Japanese-language versions. Other work includes both the digital and on-stage versions of the Infallible Award-winner “Planet of the Grapes Live From NYC” (Zoo Venues, Edinburgh 2021), the cosmic raga opera “Waves of Gravity” with Neel Murgai (LaMama CultureHub), and “David and Katie Get Re-Married,” which is headed to Edinburgh Fringe this summer. As a performer, Michole has

spent the last two years acting as Jillian in Lia Romeo's "Yoga With Jillian," in NYC, regionally, and abroad. Michole is a producer of Project Y's yearly Women in Theatre Festival. She has been featured by Amy Poehler's "Smart Girls," National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and *The Brooklyn Rail*. Recipient: SDC Gielgud Fellowship for classical directing. Her work has been supported by grants from The Puffin Foundation, ART/NY, New York Department of Cultural Affairs, The Dramatists Guild, and New York State Council on the Arts. She holds an MFA in Directing from Rutgers University, Mason Gross School of the Arts. She is an Associate of Theatre at Middlebury College.

**Lida Winfield** is an interdisciplinary artist merging dance, choreography, storytelling and visual art. As an artist, educator and keynote presenter, she has performed and taught nationally and internationally in traditional and non-traditional environments, from the Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, Maine, to MindMingle in Malviya Nagar, New Delhi. Lida's artistic practice is inextricably linked to her role as an educator, and her pedagogy is rooted in inclusion and access. Lida studied at the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and earned an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College. Her work has received support from the Vermont Arts Council, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the National Performance Network and has been commissioned by the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, the Middlebury Performing Arts Series, The Yard, and Jacob's Pillow. Lida is currently an assistant professor of Dance and part of the Conflict Transformation Collaborative at Middlebury College.

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