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Snappy brings Gorey's work to life

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In Snappy Dance Theater's cleverly inventive new "The Temperamental Wobble," a Fleet-Boston Celebrity Series commission given its world premiere last night, the humorously creepy art of author and illustrator Edward Gorey is given "legs." A woman's shadow dances with that of her beloved arisen from the grave. Three circus performers cavort as a hanged woman dangles unceremoniously nearby. Tombstones and umbrellas are everywhere, and it's all presided over by a Gorey-like figure in dark coat, bowler hat, and white tennis shoes.

It's a nifty idea. Gorey's darkly warped wit and eerie imagery seem tailor-made for expanding into minidramas, and Snappy's artistic director Martha Mason along with the company's six other talented performers have found the material fertile ground. However, the closest "The Temperamental Wobble" comes to any kind of story line is via Bonnie Duncan's pig-tailed waif (the Innocent Child), who periodically

Snappy Dance Theater

Presented by FleetBoston

Celebrity Series

At: Cutler Majestic Theatre, last night
(repeats tonight)

gets abused and neglected in the midst of her feuding parents' brawl and who ultimately seems to be swallowed up by a forest of thorny carnivorous plants. (That penultimate section, vividly played out in silhouette behind a scrim, is particularly macabre.)

Otherwise, the piece unfolds as a series of illustrations brought to life. Snappy's trademark is a kind of sculptural gymnastics — acrobatic flips and leaps, off-kilter balances, dancers standing on each others' shoulders, multilayered lifts — and this piece is a terrific showcase for its physical virtuosity and theatrical vibrance.

Though it's engaging in its moody eccentricity, it's a little disjoint over the long haul, and some of the longer sections feel protracted. At 70-plus minutes, the work needs some judicious tightening. What helps hold it together is Michael Rodach's brilliantly colorful and atmospheric original score.

The first half of the program beautifully highlighted Snappy's choreographic depth and diversity. Five miniatures spanning six years ranged from the absurd to the poetic. "Tango Tangle" was a charmingly skewed duet for Jim Banta and Bess Whitesel which turned the male/female dynamic upside down — literally — and raw sexuality was exemplified by ecstatic sniffs of each other's armpits. "Out of the Blue" was a jaunty little romp for colored lights that hopped, flickered, and wiggled until lines and blobs finally coalesced into a smiling face.

In "Movement in D'Flat," Sean Kilbridge was the befuddled pawn of a dance noir in which movable black panels revealed femme fatales and disappearing corpses. Mason and Bonnie Duncan gave an exquisite performance of the sculptural "Mirabile Dictu," a slow-motion poetic reverie, with one or the other dancer lying on her back supporting her partner on outstretched arms and legs. "Flip/Switch" was a busy exercise for the full company in the art of the quick change, as partners connected then regrouped in a dizzying blur.