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Snappy Dance evokes Gorey terror, wonder

Snappy Dance Theater, at the Cutler Majestic Theater, Boston, last night; repeats tonight.

By T.J. MEDREK

The pen-and-ink illustrations of Edward Gorey are like fairy tales, conjured from both the brightest wonders and darkest terrors of childhood.

DANCE REVIEW

They're simultaneously fey and feral.

Choreographer Martha Mason's dances have a similarly double-edged quality, their disturbing implications only partly hidden by their overtly theatrical smarts.

Put them together, as in Mason's brand-new, Gorey-based "The Temperamental Wobble," and you've got a dance that's as thought-provoking, compelling and masterful as they come.

"The Temperamental Wobble" was commissioned by the Fleet-Boston Celebrity Series, which presented Mason's Snappy Dance Theater in the work's world premiere last night at the Cutler Majestic Theatre as part of the Boston Marquee Series. If you don't already have tickets for the only repeat performance tonight, I'd advise you get 'em now.

With superb support from Michael Rodach's hauntingly evocative score, Kambriel's mostly shades-of-gray costumes and Joseph Levendusky's powerful lighting, Mason has done more than give movement to Gorey's still images. She's embraced his Victorian world of dark and shadow as her own and presented it to us in a way that's utterly absorbing.

Mason and dancers Jim Banta, Bonnie Duncan, Tim Gallagher, Sean Kilbridge, Jeremy Towle and Bess Whitesel — all made up with Gorey's trademark hollow eyes — evoked the artist's most terrifying visions with remarkable precision.

Ghosts dance macabre *pas de deux* with their tombstones. A trio of acrobats grimly go through their paces — until one bumps into a grieving widow hanging lifeless by the neck from a rope. And, in a lighter mood, a ballerina and her partner rehearse a ballet in a way that captures but doesn't mock the implausibility of classical dance.

Most prominently, and repeatedly, a pair of self-absorbed parents use their forlorn daughter to swipe at each other with no mercy for each other or for her. And on it went, for 70 minutes of some of the most powerful and, yes, chilling visual poetry I've seen.

Not long enough to fill an entire concert, "The Temperamental Wobble" was preceded by a curtain-raiser of five short, mostly recent works. Three particularly impressed.

"Tango Tangle" set Banta and Whitesel repeatedly colliding with unexpected results. "Out of the Blue" was a living computer screensaver that resolved into a smiley face. And "Movement in D'Flat" quite brilliantly conjured up a paranoid vision that seemed straight out of a classic "Twilight Zone" episode.