performance

Getalong Little Doggie
at Link's Hall, April 24 and 25

By Justin Hayford

Male Bondage

In the last few decades, masculinity has gotten a bad rap. Sure, it deserved that rap, given its propensity to turn supple, vulnerable preadolescent boys into stiff, disengaged Joint Chiefs of Staff. But the once illuminating feminist critique of masculinity has grown shrill and formulaic, and the art world has been flooded with facile work either decrying patriarchy or celebrating inner goddesses. No wonder so many straight guys go off to beat their drums and polish their blades in the woods; I'd pack a lunch too if it would keep bad male-bashing art at arm's length.

But I want to hold Dolores Wilber's performance piece close to my heart. Her hour-long *Getalong Little Doggie* is rich with the ambiguity, ambivalence, and irresolution sorely absent from so much similar work. Performed by three men and a 12-year-old boy, *Getalong Little Doggie* never criticizes or condemns masculinity. Rather Wilber attempts to muddle its definition, showing us a side of maleness that's ridiculous, charming, pathetic, and powerfully sad.

In press materials, Wilber says the piece is "about men and how they struggle to get through their lives," suggesting that they're pitiable tragic figures. In performance, that sense of pity is unmistakable. The piece opens with a young boy in an empty room sitting before a television monitor, holding a bouquet of purple flowers. He's illuminated only by the image on the screen, a tight close-up of an upside-down male face. The boy pulls one of his flowers from the bunch and draws it slowly back and forth across the screen as though outlining the facial contours. His posture is one of deep melancholy, and he mutters something inaudible. It's as though the boy were performing a silent elegy, reaching out for an unattainable male ideal with an archetypally feminine flower.

As the boy continues, a black-and-white film is projected on the rear wall, as far from the boy as possible. It shows the torsos of two shirtless men colliding over and over again in a semiaggressive, semiplayful way; always their gestures are without purpose. They're not fighting or dancing; they're just going through the motions in an emotionally dead spectacle—but a spectacle nonetheless, all hollow bravado, all outward display. The boy, on the other hand, seems lost in a deep internal reverie.

This tension between inner and outer selves is the essence of *Getalong Little Doggie.* Over the next 55 minutes, Wilber puts her men through a series of clownish routines that highlight the split in their personalities. They flail about in an abstract, lyrical playground, dressed in blue jeans, white dress shirts, and black bow ties and more often than not carrying bouquets, a band of errant suitors courting their own lost selves.

We first meet all four as they stare one another down in a bright walkway of light. The three men stand opposed to the boy and carry themselves as though they were about to draw weapons. The man in front—the hypermercurial Michael Stumm—leans forward, points a menacing finger at the boy, Kevin Simonds, and says, "I don't suppose there's any way we can work this out, Kevin." Then the men and the boy slowly close the gap between them, as though preparing for a shoot-out in an old western. But at the critical moment, when you might expect six-shooters to fly, Stumm and Simonds stand motionless, their faces inches apart. It's a moment of extraordinary intimacy, as if each expected the other to embrace him.

The embrace never materializes. The boy and the man have demonstrated how they would look if they desired affection from each other. But of course they don't—they *can't,* not with those other guys there. As the piece progresses, Wilber continually exploits this dynamic, sending the performers into embraces carefully choreographed to reveal the perfect absence of affection. Sometimes two performers stand face-to-face, and one extends his arms straight out to his sides, tilts them 45 degrees to his left like a banking aircraft, places his arms around the other—then repeats the process to the right. At other times one man wraps his arms around another's chest, and immediately both pretend they're brawling. It's as if the men felt their every moment of physical contact were under strict scrutiny, and they must prevent any inkling of tenderness from becoming apparent. But for all their unwillingness to admit affection, a bit always sneaks through; after they separate, they straighten each other's crinkled shirts.

Such a tiny gesture opens the sluices of the massive subterranean emotional pool beneath this piece. These men are such endearing things, with their little bow ties and store-bought flowers, but they can't engage one another on more than a purely gestural level. Yet they never separate, flocking together around the stage like puppies without a mother. Their need for one another is palpable, although it's indicated only through the smallest movements and glances.

The best they can do to fulfill this need is play for each other. They don't play *with* each other; leaving at least one person as audience allows them to maintain surveillance over themselves, preventing a slip into real affection. Sometimes they sing songs. Sometimes they tell fairy tales. But mostly they turn themselves upside down, paint faces on their chins, and become "chin people," projecting their puppet selves in huge video images on the back wall. These sections are hysterically funny, for the grotesque creatures they make of themselves are utterly at odds with the matter-of-fact texts they deliver—about the fear of death, about the importance of dental hygiene, about being stranded on a desert island with only four words.

But what is mournfully clear throughout the evening is that the men—like their headless, belly-bucking counterparts on film—are merely going through the motions. They can never truly own a moment, can never fully commit to a gesture, because to do so would risk an emotional connection. Even with their arms around each other they seem to be saying, "This is what it would look like if I had my arms around you, but of course I would never do that." The cast (which also includes Murray McKay and Molloy Golden) never turn the piece maudlin, never play the tragedy under the waterline. Instead they simply perform their series of meaningless tasks, never pausing long enough to ponder their predicament. Their emotional indifference is genuine; Wilber understands that the ones who need to feel an emotional ache are the audience, not the performers. And watching these sweet buffoons miss each other by a hundred miles all evening long is sad indeed.

And all the sadder because these men don't realize what they're missing. They're content in their isolation. Only in the final moments, when Stumm and Simonds sing Hank Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," do they demonstrate the tiniest bit of emotional self-awareness. Yet, as usual in this piece, it's merely the outward show of emotional self-awareness, leaving the men as isolated as ever. For Wilber, masculinity is loneliness in perpetual motion, suggesting that men are more to be pitied than feared. ■