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## OTUS

Company Oliveira and Bachtler

Chapter & Coreo Cymru

Dance House, Wales Millennium Centre

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Review by Othniel Smith



Oliveira & Bachtler  
Credit: Company Oliveira & Bachtler

A steady trickle of sawdust from the ceiling. Several ridiculously complex assemblages of wooden blocks. A woman walks gingerly on another set of blocks set up to look like a trail of dominoes. In the corner, a man intentionally over-balances the table at which he is sitting. This is the universe of *OTUS* into which we are immediately plunged on entry.

A collaboration between performers Hugo Oliveira and Sage Bachtler Cushman, who have both served time in the ensemble of Cardiff-based No Fit State Circus, the piece, which has been in development for some time, was commissioned by Coreo Cymru as an attempt to bring together the disciplines of circus (the animal-free variety) and contemporary dance.

Soon, the dominoes are toppled, although not in one unbroken sequence (the post-show discussion confirms that this was a source of frustration for the performers, although they covered it well); and it becomes clear that the man and woman are consciously sharing the space, and that *OTUS* is a portrait of the ups and downs (sometimes literally) of a relationship, taking place in an abstract milieu, and without a simplistic plot-line.

Oliveira and Cushman perform both solo and in duet; he frequently carries her over to a pile of blocks and plonks her there; literally putting her in her place. Naturally, she is not content to be sidelined.

The male and female elements of the relationship seem to behave differently. Leaving aside the fact that Oliveira displays circus skills to a greater extent than his partner (acrobatics, manipulating objects etc), his character seems more proactive—manhandling the wooden blocks and constantly attempting to reconfigure his environment and find private space.

Cushman's female protagonist, on the other hand, is more conventionally balletic in her movements, and seems more content to negotiate the universe as she finds it.

There are moments of great virtuosity: Oliveira's balancing and twirling of beams is hugely impressive; and Cushman performs a pole-dance style routine on a suspended rope, accompanied by Nina Simone's version of "House Of The Rising Sun", which is the very definition of sultry.

The rest of the soundtrack is varied, ranging from the percussively electronic to neo-classical minimalism. Silence is also frequently deployed, which seems to point up the tension between the onstage couple.

Inevitably there is juggling, but it is integrated innovatively into the interpersonal narrative. The climax of the piece is a dazzling piece of trapeze-work in which Cushman finally visits damage on Bruno Capucho's elaborate set.

Occasionally baffling, often beautiful and arresting throughout, *OTUS* certainly deserves to be widely seen.

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