

Joe Goode, Joyce Theater, New York

[Print](#)

By Apollinaire Scherr

Published: April 28 2009 22:08 | Last updated: April 28 2009 22:08

Joe Goode is that rare postmodern dance-theatre maker who can play Montana and Wyoming without emptying the house. It's not instantly apparent why. The language in this San Francisco icon's loosely plotted pieces is plain like Gertrude Stein, not plain like a prairie. The movement may be athletic and big-boned, but it's emotionally opaque. The few extravagant moments – decked out in feather boas and ten-gallon hats – spell gay swish and brawn, not Broadway razzmatazz. And the American archetypes populating the work – the disaffected cowboys, mean-spirited cheerleaders and neurotic superheroes – cry out for camp, which Goode delivers.

But – here's the catch – camp gesture interests him less than camp spirit. Goode homes in on the awe, not the idols, widening his appeal beyond the camp sophisticate.

Maverick Strain – one of two pieces on the seven-member Joe Goode Performance Group's US tour – mixes cowboy cabaret with playful homage to the 1961 cult movie *The Misfits*. At one point, an ageing cowboy (the highly entertaining Goode) explains how to "just live" – "scratch yourself, throw stones at a can, whistle". With dancing as sturdy and handsome as fences, this funny, understated piece reminds you how nice scratching yourself can be.



Frozen want: 'Wonderboy'

In *Wonderboy*, a timid, curious child (played by one of Basil Twist's delicate Bunraku-inspired puppets) achieves this Zen mind too, but not before he watches for years from his window as golden boys pass by. If Superman is action, Wonderboy is frozen want.

Unlike the usual, treacly tales of poetic souls, though, the boy doesn't find freedom through his unique creative powers but because he has back-up. The performers take turns speaking for him and animating his limbs until this self-identified "fabrication" jumps from the window and squeaks, "I'm great!" The dancers repeat after him, "You're great." The audience laughs: affirmations are ridiculous. But sometimes, via a mysterious transference, they work. When the Wizard of Oz presents the Tin Man with a heart, he finds his own. Likewise, the puppet discovers his legs when the performers turn their bodies into a bicycle and peddle him forward on their upturned feet.

Wonderboy proceeds by similar means, filling you with the earnestness it prizes over irony until, when the curtain falls, you're not filing it under "feel-good", you actually feel good. ★★★★★

Tel +1 212 242 0800

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2009