

# Culture Blog

## Nicholas Leichter/Monstah Black for DanceNOW(NYC) at Joe's Pub

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Nick Leichter and Monstah Black brought it Home - as in there's no place like it - in DanceNOW's most recent full-length modern dance musical, *The Wiz*. From the moment Monstah begins his R&B crooning in full-blown afro wig, complete with hair pick, a soulful tone is set and we know we're getting the goods in this 70s-to-2010 mashup.

The Leichter/Black team is proving a rich collaboration served very well by the setting at Joe's Pub. The duo's hot hype matches the playful, good-time audience used to the musically based Dancemopolitan series. Monstah's cabaret personality threads through the entire work and he works the floor with plenty of panache. Nick's blend of urban and classical dance vocabularies, with the aid of additional choreography by the saucy Wendell Cooper, plays out well in the close quarters. Dance at Joe's Pub works best when it has wit and style, when it understands the atmosphere of tables, wait staff, cat calls, cocktails, menus and an audience out for entertainment. *The Wiz* hits the right mix: the energy is high, the dancing robust, the singing great, and the green-sequined divas plentiful.

There were enough references to the late 70s film version (and I suppose the original Broadway show) to satisfy any "Brand New Day" nostalgic needs. Though I missed any obvious Lena Horne/Glinda moments, we did get a Diana Ross bit, complete with portable electric fan to keep Dawn Robinson's hair flying for "Soon As I Get Home." There was a brief appearance by David Parker who belted out a rousing "Be a Lion" after sitting quietly at the bar for about 4/5ths of the show. We got a snippet of what a luscious mover Monstah is during The Tin Man's "If I Could Feel" and, finally, someone addressed the homo-erotic underpinnings of "Slide Some Oil" (on me), not to forget the oozing "Juicy Fruit" number for Leichter, Cooper, and Keon Thoulouis that had the two ladies in front of me gasping for air ("Oh God, all three of them at once."). Singer/performance artist Yozmit appeared out of an installation of white, plastic sheets that, I think, she'd been sitting in for longer than Parker was at the bar to sing a haunting, gibberish/Pansori lament as the Wicked Witch of the East Village. Korean is a soulful language and Yozmit's performance, wrapped in white plastic, with his head in a large, clear bubble turned the witch into an unwillingly bound shaman.

Monstah, Leichter, Cooper, and Yozmit provide a multiplicity of club and underground aesthetics that appropriately reference the disco-inspired original while offering a more contemporary vision of New York's urban dance and performance cultures. Their Poppy Girls turned into a gender-bending Papi dance full of hip slides and hand snaps - strike the pose, work the pose - that would have challenged any Drag Race contestant. Lauren Basco, Laurie Taylor, Stephanie Liapis and Aaron Draper (in a delightful popping "Mean Ol' Lion" solo, dressed in boxing headgear and gloves) rounded out the hard-dancing MJ and Prince-channeling cast and moved *The Wiz*'s original celebration of African-American liberty into a modern day dance party for pluralism.