

Momix presents: **Opus Cactus**

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By

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Momix dancers portraying the gila monster in *Opus Cactus*

**Momix** is back touring the land with a new, full-evening entertainment, and, evidently, the local dance press corps, such as it is, could not care less. Colleagues - and they range from legitimate observers to self-proclaimed sophisticates to die-hard local boosters - were conspicuously absent Friday evening (April 4) when this exuberant physical theater troupe launched a three-performance stay at **Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley**. Perhaps, Momix is too popular, too aware of the necessity to connect with an audience to warm hard critical hearts. In some circles, Momix's for-profit status just won't wash.

In any case, Momix's latest melding of dance and illusion, *Opus Cactus*, conceived and directed by **Moses Pendleton**, is a winner, and the piece goes far to establish an identity separate from its mother company, **Pilobolus**, which seems recently to have reacquired critical respect. In 1981, Pendleton left Pilobolus, of which he was a cofounder, to start up Momix (named after a brand of cattle feed), and he has never looked back. The two companies are mistakenly linked in the public mind. In fact, their styles vary dramatically, Pilobolus these days specializes in parables, whereas Momix trades in movement vignettes; the best are sharp and innovative and rarely outstay their welcome. The movement theater gambits and aerial work that Momix has refined over the past two decades have now become the currency of experimental artists, who, in certain outposts of civilization, are praised sometimes for reinventing the wheel. Momix, however, is not out to prove anything; it is out to provide moments of rare kinetic beauty, which defy the usual rules of logic and head right for the senses and the imagination.

It was the desert that inspired Pendleton when he was setting a ballet in New Mexico and the 19 sections of *Opus Cactus* explore that terrain with irresistible originality. To everything, the 12 uncommonly buffed performers bring a congenial gusto. As you enter, two huge facsimiles of saguaro cactuses frame the proscenium, the curtain rises on a starry backdrop, before which **Natalie Lamonte** reclines on a hammock. Choreographer **Brian Sanders** calls it "Sonoran: But Not Asleep," and you watch fascinated as the hammock and its occupant are twisted into all kinds of bizarre shapes. The audience supplies the metaphors.



Momix dancer portraying the moth in *Opus Cactus*

Pendleton seems obsessed with the light of the desert. Later, in Sanders' "Fire Walker," a man attaches sterno pots to his feet and strolls with feet of fire (absolutely no relationship with Michael Flaherty, thank heaven). Weird wondrous shapes proliferate - red gila monsters crawling across the stage, giant ostriches, creepy scorpions, and at the end, thanks to puppeteer **Michael Curry**, an immense, ominous moth, flapping its wings (no, don't think ancient Japanese horror movies).

The gymnastic edge with which Momix has been branded is never far from the center. You could feast on three men negotiating a "Pole Dance," and in "Dream Catcher," Lomonte and **Ari Loeb** rock on a huge Alan Boeding jungle gym, testing gravity as the contraption seems to take on a mind of its own. Then, there are the marvelous silhouettes and the images that have no reason to exist, except for their sheer beauty. In "Sundance," four women manipulate giant fans attached to their waists, creating configurations, both familiar and enigmatic that represent imagistic theater at its apogee.

The sound score is a remarkable mix of world musics, plus **Brian Eno**, **Mickey Hart** and a bit of **Bach**, courtesy of the **Swingle Singers**. I found it alternately mesmerizing and relentless, much like the sun beating down on the Southwestern desert that propelled Pendleton to conjure this remarkable entertainment.

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