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Structure & Sadness
photo Jeff Busby

ACCORDING TO JÉRÔME BEL, TO WATCH CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE IS TO GAMBLE AGAINST THE ODDS. "DOES ANYONE ASK FOR THEIR MONEY BACK?", ASKS CLASSICAL THAI DANCER, PICHET KLUNCHUN. "NO, THEY ACCEPT THE RISK", SAYS BEL.

I prefer to think of that risk in other than economic terms: that we go to performance to risk ourselves and that, every now and then, the risk pays off. We become smitten, taken over, inhabited by a power beyond and below who we are. A crowd of individuals walks in, lights dim, marking a break with the everyday. There is an energetic connection between the audience and a work, poised to dissipate but sometimes, sometimes it explodes. At its most animal, it bites, like Marie Brassard's wolf (Peepshow) or pounds like Romeo Castellucci's truncheon (Tragedia Endogonia). The wound is our human mortality, an opening which may be covered but never closed.

brassard

Marie Brassard uses sound distortion to assume multiple shapes, the wolf who stalks Little Red Riding Hood, a young woman stalking an older man, a child, a man, a woman. Eyes shrouded in dark glasses, her impenetrability contrasts with our own, for we are invaded by her voice, his voice, its voice. There is a corporeal immediacy about sound. It sets moods, timbres of feeling outside the sagging impact of language. In Brassard's case, however, the texture of sound is melded with text, compelling us to take a journey, following crumbs in a dark forest. Like Bel, Brassard too speaks of a gamble. Here it is a child's expectation that school will take the student beyond the obvious, through unexpected doors. The child is disappointed but we are not. Our final destination is the wolf's lair, a series of doors leading beyond the known world. Like Herman Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf*, this theatre is for the madman within.

castellucci

Romeo Castellucci's epic consideration of creation through the book of Genesis —Genisi, from the Museum of Sleep (MIAF 2003)—provoked a visceral excitement, from the small flickerings of light to the blinding whiteness of Auschwitz, the antithesis of creation. This year's *Tragedia Endogonia* was also performed in white, white marble, splashed with red. The horror of a police beating, reminiscent of Dario Fo's play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, was magnified by the sounds of the truncheon. Sound does something beyond the visual. We can watch from a distance, but sound enters the body, it touches us in the passages of the mind.

wilson

Robert Wilson's collaboration with Indonesian artists operated in other ways. A highly visual work, recalling shadow puppetry, *I La Galiga* performed an epic consideration of human desire and spiritual fulfillment based upon *Sureq Galigo*, the epic poem of the Bugis people of South Sulawesi. Wilson's refined sensibility manifested in the most delicate of colour changes, shifting tones and frames, allowing for the collaborative contribution of Indonesian dancers and musicians, resplendent in texture and textile, musical mastery and narrative power. If *Tragedia Endogonia* was a meditation on time, *I La Galiga* occurred before time began, in the netherworld of gods made human. While the story hails from early Bugis society, Wilson's dancers and musicians provided a corporeal link, a bodily genealogy reaching towards the cultural origins of *Sureq Galigo*. One of the great pleasures of the work was seeing fantastic performers from a tradition quite outside the Western canon. Their energy, their use of form, gravity and focus was quite particular, forming a hybrid of Indonesian art and Western theatre tradition. Having seen some Japanese Noh theatre recently, I was reminded how a work over several hours unfolds rhythmically, unable to be contained in the one thought, the one soundbite familiar to conventional Western theatre.

warby

Unlikely works also achieve vastness. Ros Warby's *Monumental* was performed alone in a large space yet was equally compelling in its own attempt to address the philosophical question of being and time. Through engaging with non-human life, Warby immediately extended the realm of the solo dance form into larger questions of

existence. Her work as bird was not produced through mimesis but arose through a powerful evocation of the being of the bird. This was boldly enhanced by black and white projections of birds, that opaque look of the bird, its stare. Warby rendered the jointedness of birdlike action through a choreography of line and angle, an inhuman collage of movement without sentiment. Margie Medlin's lighting design and (with Ben Speth) her wonderful images of sections of Warby's body in movement amplified the sense that this was not about the person. Black and white enlargement of bodily sections achieved a kinaesthetic abstraction beyond the human. Warby's skill manifests in the ability to differentiate qualities of movement in motion, to sustain change within a body over time. If art relates to our becoming animal rather than the rarified human (Deleuze), Ros Warby has allowed the spectator to experience much more than the celebrated dance of personality.

guerin

Lucy Guerin's *Structure and Sadness* also looks beyond the human, at the interaction between animate and inanimate. Taking its lead from the collapse of Melbourne's West Gate bridge in 1970, Guerin's work explores physical forms of dependence. A meandering house of cards is slowly assembled, snaking through space. While we might admire the domino effect played out in miniature, the actual meaning of the collapse was tragic, not aesthetic. Fiona Cameron represented the way we live and die, blind to the fortune which lies around the corner, as distinct from the god-spectator who is able to predict disaster. *Structure and Sadness* was moving, combining physical meditation with human predicament. The movement leant on the materials of the work in a way which mirrored the theme of dependence and vulnerability at a kinaesthetic level. We watch the assemblage of fluorescent tubes over time—construction, destruction, construction—into a neon iconography of the bridge that fell.

Guerin also showed a work that she developed in Japan, a double bill with Koto Yamazaki. Guerin's *Setting* was a gentle rendition in danced form of an interaction which might occur between people who share neither language nor culture. Objects were used onstage to delineate space and life aspiration. The gentle yet quirky affection between performers suggested something similar from the choreographer. The domestic proportions of Guerin's collaboration contrasted with Yamazaki's epic aspiration to depict the Australian landscape, a bold vision, but the piece looked like a satire of B-grade horror movies, minus the humour. The dancers worked really hard and with great integrity but I found myself emotionally outside rather than inside *Chamisa 4¼C*. Such are the risks of making and showing work.

yamazaki; bill t jones

I am sorry to kick a choreographer when he's down but I also found *Fluid Huh-Hug's Rise:Rose* underwhelming. It began with a certain refined energy, and Yamazaki's own dancing melded seamlessly with the choreography but, by the time Paul Matteson performed a series of earnest ballet moves, the piece had begun to unravel. Its earlier sections with the three performers had some lovely interactions, and Mina Nishimura's dancing was really interesting. But the piece seemed to lose the plot, lacking an

editorial sensibility which might have saved the day. The same problem was evident in Bill T Jones' *Blind Date*, a commendable critique of American militaristic, God-bothering imperialism. Its overload of images, text and movement detracted from the power of the work. Although *Blind Date* avowed continual questioning, attempting to break open American forms of certainty, the dancing itself was so confident, without question. Whilst performers took the risk of falling backwards into the arms of fellow performers, this looked more like a game than an expression of vulnerability. What *Blind Date* did offer was a palpable sense of community, of support, attention and emotional concern between the dancers.

bel

Finally then to Jérôme Bel's *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*. I loved this piece, for its performative gems (Klunchun was superb), its ability to represent theatrical difference and for its sheer stimulation. The interaction between the two men was a lesson in the kinds of corporeal literacy implicit in each artist's work. Although national differences were addressed, the work did not degenerate into cross-cultural banality. Specific questions were entered into, such as the representation of death, the territorial specificity of Klunchun's body within space, and Bel's disruption of the canons of Western theatre. Through conversation and enactment, the work allowed for multiple perspectives, for the wandering of the audience around issues of kinaesthetic investigation. Space was made for our own relation to the work. The focus of both performers was intense. Klunchun's demonstration of walking was so clear, so physically differentiated and nuanced. And lest we imagine that he simply replicates the canon, he also explained the sense in which he has deconstructed and reconstructed his dance form. Bel and Klunchun are highly thoughtful artists, able to articulate their concerns in words and deed in ways which inform the experience of watching.

Melbourne International Arts Festival: Romeo Castellucci, *Tragedia Endogonia*, BR#04 Brussels, Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse Oct 12-15; Ros Warby, *Monumental*, Playhouse Oct 13-15; Lucy Guerin Inc, *Structure and Sadness*, Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse, October 18-21; Robert Wilson, *I La Galigo*, Arts Centre, State Theatre, Oct 19-23; Kota Yamazaki/Fluid hug-hug, *Rise:Rose*, Arts Centre, Playhouse, October 22-23; Marie Brassard, *Peepshow*, Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse, Oct 24-28; Bill T Jones, *Blind Date*, Arts Centre, State Theatre, October 25-28; Kota Yamazaki, Lucy Guerin, *Chamisa 4°C/Setting*, Beckett Theatre, Oct 25-28; Pichet Klunchun and Myself, Arts Centre Playhouse, Oct 26-28

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