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Brighton Festival 2014 Talk to the Demon

Genre: Dance and Movement Theatre



Venue: Brighton Dome Concert Hall

Low Down

Category defying new work by seminal Belgian theatre / choreographer / film maker Wim Vandekeybus. A strange narrative that disregards traditional story structure in favour of a skewed dream logic. It is an adult realm, viewed through the distorting funfair lens of childhood. A childhood realm viewed through the foggy distortion of the organising adult brain.

Review

'Any demon that you can swallow, gives you its power'. Joseph Cambell, mythologist.

An actor stands on stage between two 8 or 9 year old children, Luke and Martha. We are given a choice – or rather, the illusion of a choice. We are allowed to participate in the idea that we might be controlling our own destiny. 'we have two children and only one part. You have to vote, on which child you want to perform tonight'. We choose the boy. The girl slumps off, dismayed. This is momentarily, mildly upsetting – then – we let it go and on with the show.

The performers squint to see us through their stage lights. They come right down and lean over of the cusp of the stage to peer at us more closely. We are the other. The other culture. The other race. The crowd. The foreign species. The shadow. We are the ones who are 'them'. They are the 'us'.

What follows is a strange narrative that disregards traditional story structure in favour of a skewed dream logic. It is an adult realm, viewed through the distorting funfair lens of childhood. A childhood realm viewed through the foggy distortion of the organising adult brain.

I suspect some of the discomfort of audiences has been with the decision to cast two young children and place them in a dark and threatening world. The children, I sensed were safely held by the piece and had a considerable amount of fun being involved. Some of the best stories about the experience of childhood play with deeply terrifying themes after all; Guillermo Del Toro's mighty Pan's Labyrinth springs to mind.

Lord of the Flies style schoolyard chaos opens out into a catalogue of demons, with whom Luke, apparently the protagonist, must wrangle. Luke is a bit frightened at first, but develops a strategy for each demon. I particularly loved the demon that Luke 'sucked' towards him until its cheek became stuck to his lips, then he 'blew' off stage again. As soon as the first demon slithers out from behind a rusted bit of iron cladding, to a haunting, sucking piece of organic sound effect, I found I could relax, because I saw that in this particular world, the children had agency.

Once tamed, Luke instructs the group of hapless adults to become horses, then cows. 'STOP!' he cries. Like Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, he makes himself the god of the monsters of his imaginative world. The childrens' innocence gives them special license to slip through the traps and pit falls of the adult universe.

The whole sound design is self generated, using sense responsive microphones and a beautifully built analogue sound machine that, when amplified, makes Luke temporarily the composer of the piece. This pared back use of sound effect anchors our experience of musicality and rhythm in the bodies of the performers and so even the silent passages take on a

kinaesthetic, sculptural quality. I found it a bold and risky choice that paid dividends.

Vandekeybus' long time muse Jerry Killick, in a white suit, straggly blond hair and wild eyes, channels something of Werner Herzog's long time muse and antagonist, actor Claus Kinski. I think of the slow burn collapse-of-the-'civilised'-world-disaster-epic, Fitzcaraldo and Kinski standing aloof and mad in imperialist misplaced majesty. The wild man besuited and uneasily contained.

Jerry performs tonight with his daughter Martha Killick who is the child we rejected. (The Q&A earlier that morning revealed that Vandekeybus casts different children for different shows depending on geography. Some girls some boys. All from different cultures.)

'You chose the shitty kid' he snarls at us, with little Luke in earshot. It stings.

A revolution transpires over a dispute over chocolate initiated by Martha but escalated by the adults. Martha is eventually sacrificed as a result of a revolution over a stupid triviality. The demon who performs this act has the arms of a woman and the body of a man. This split suggests a lack of accountability for the horrific act: I wasn't there! I didn't do it! It wasn't me! The person you see in the mirror is another guy, not me. He is a different guy completely...

A comparison with German film maker Werner Herzog is apposite: Our wild nature and our attempts to contain it. The chaos of nature triumphing over our ability to control it. That we *are* that natural chaos. It is in us. Our humanness is not separate from it. *Talk to the Demon*. This is no Christian demonology; there is no polemic of darkness and light. This is an atavistic world of ancient, more humanoid gods: humanoid horses, walls that sing and mischievous spirits. We are these demons. They are also us.

It could do with tightening up in places - at one hour and 45 minutes - it runs 15 minutes over its advertised time: the first ribbon dance, some of the revolution sequence, the clown sequence at the end could benefit from a judicious edit. There are a couple of performances that feel like they don't quite sit in the whole stylistically - but this is a young piece at the beginning of its touring life so I don't doubt this will smooth out as it finds its performance muscle.

The aesthetic of Talk To The Demon has a looseness and informality that belies very carefully chosen elements. Its performance style is mostly collapsed and casual, the costume design following the absurd but specific and detailed logic of dreams. Its design principles are so anti-design as to suggest we might not even be watching a performance at all. I can imagine this was befuddling for certain audience members. I loved it. I found I could settle into its skewed primitive logic like I might a Fellini film.

Vandekeybus, like Fellini, has no formal training in the field in which he is working (Fellini trained as a clown), so he has never been constrained by ideas of how he 'should' be doing something. It is as if he sniffs out and hunts down the material rather than composes it - he doesn't know, he's not sure, but he has a hunch and he rolls with that. It is a dangerous way of working, failure and success in uncomfortably close proximity. But I like that after all these years of making work, Vandekeybus is still daring to teeter on that creative edge.

Reviewed by Rachel Blackman Wednesday 14th May 2014

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