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BIENNALE OF SYDNEY

The art of disappearance

Virginia Baxter: Mette Edvardsen, No title



Mette Edvardsen (R), Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine
 image courtesy Biennale of Sydney

Almost three weeks into the Sydney Biennale and we've already sampled some pretty striking performances. In Boris Charmatz' Manger (see our 13 April E-dition) an incredibly dedicated company of dancers defied all manner of OH&S by putting themselves through 40 minutes of peristaltic convulsion and ecstatic seizure on the concrete floor of Carriageworks, all the while consuming a stash of edible paper. In a tight spot on Level 2 of the MCA, Adam Linder's Some Proximity (one performer of the three down on the day we saw it) wove prose into gliding movement, using randomly gathered texts pinned to the wall as an impetus for some eloquent locomotion, not always revealing in the juxtaposition.

Meanwhile, Norwegian dance artist Mette Edvardsen worked some quiet magic in two contrasting and poetic works. I couldn't get to it but word on the first, titled Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, was glowing with many people signing up for a second visit. Staged at Newtown Library, it involved a group of local dancers/performers memorising chapters from a series of books. Audience members chose a volume from a list of possibilities and then located their reader who, in turn, led them to another part of the library and, seated opposite or casually strolling alongside, imparted the text from memory.

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In her solo performance No Title, Edvardsen is interested in “how reality exists in language and how this extends into real space... how memory and imagination blur” (artist’s website www.metteedvardsen.be). The use of lists is a commonplace in performance but in this case, the framework is powerfully deployed.

Edvardsen stands before her seated audience, her appearance unremarkable except for the fact that her eyes are closed. In a while she announces, “One leg and one arm—gone. Balance—gone. Me—not gone.”

And so begins a subtly unfolding tragedy in which our fears of death, of unstoppable destruction, of vanishing landscapes, the extinction of species are called up as Edvardsen in plainly articulated speech moves undramatically through the space of Carriageworks Track 8, simply reporting one by one the end of the world of ordinary things we have come to know and love.

“Facing the light
Being warmed by the light
Falling
Floating
Flying
All gone.”



Mette Edvardsen, No title
image courtesy Biennale of Sydney

Blindly, she walks in a circle around the empty space. It’s more of an ellipse but not bad, considering. Returning centrestage she reveals flatly, “Going in circles—gone.” There’s a ripple of relieved laughter. Who needs circles anyway? Gradually, as in Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar* (1967), the language becomes more surreal: “Me not all/ Me not gone/ Not all/ But gone.”

Edvardsen draws a straight chalk line through the middle of the space. Again, it’s not too shabby whereas erasing it ramps up the degree of difficulty. Again, tension eases. Later, in the one seemingly superfluous gesture of the performance she places a set of painted paper eyes over hers. But it’s the visions playing behind our own eyes holding our attention.

Compulsion’s fraught harmonies

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And then in the final minutes, the coup de grace:

“First row—gone
Closeness—gone
Floods and dimmers
Power supply
Green Emergency Exit light gone
The corners of the room are gone
The foreground and background gone
What this space has told you already
Gone.
Clouds sliding in opposite directions
Gone.”

I’m thinking, she’s forgotten the sound of trains travelling back and forth on the tracks so close to Carriageworks and the barely detectable rhythm of the audience breathing. Maybe these will remain?

“There is only inside,” she says. “The outside is gone,”

A sudden silence.

“Illusion is gone.”

Mette Edvardsen opens her eyes and takes us in.

“Darkness is gone,” she says.

20th Biennale of Sydney, Mette Edvardsen, No Title, Track 8, Carriageworks, Sydney, 19 March

RealTime issue #132 April-May 2016 pg.

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