

Australia's free national arts tabloid's intimate response to the 1996 Adelaide Festival. In this issue: Scriabin, Sitsky, Black Sequin Dress, Excavation, Maguire, Kronos, Inje, Pierre Henry, Meg Stuart's *No-One is Watching*

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The Black Sequin Dress, Scott Theatre, March 5

Writer & director, Jenny Kemp; Composer, Elizabeth Drake; Designer, Jacqueline Everitt; Lighting, Ben Cobham; Choreography, Jenny Kemp & Helen Herbertson

The Black Sequin Dress is like a painting come to life, or come to film, or, perhaps, become a dream as film (not a film as dream). A sort of uncinematic 'film' though. It's not possible to know what the single image might have been (once). Probably any moment when the whole cast is on stage. This perhaps is why there are tedious moments; a tiny lecture on points and lines for example, and on a single word, like 'pleasure' or 'fall'. Although I usually like such lists, it's their saying (somehow) that dispells them (the 'spell' of them, their 'spelling').

A woman from the brick suburbs, forty, exhausted, fed-up, dresses in a black sequin dress and goes to a night-club. She's not sure how to move, walking is a calculation: "one foot after the other". She has to talk her body into each step. She glances back, and falls to the shiny dance floor. This simple embarrassing collapse opens a crack in her (memory).

The woman is played by four women, the fall is taken over and over. She watches herself fall. While she stays at the club, converses, she is also elsewhere, going over the past and moving into the future. And elsewhere is made of very small things. The woman says: "reality is very small things".

The 'film' is a series of tableaux. Each designed and theatrical. And seemingly pushed and pulled between, and internal to, the peculiar inhabited times/tenses of frenzy and stillness. Repetition is used as a device, and is mostly elegant. The accumulative effect defines resonance.

The 1950s men, The Waiter and The Man, are cliches who undermine such an easy label. They do this through their willingness to hear and then talk, and through their response to something of or on or about the woman. As when the woman touches the body of The Man, while he plays a game of chance. This moves him, quietly. And when the woman asks him to help her find a dead body, he agrees, without understanding. He takes her at her word. He recognizes her, both as she sees herself and as he sees her.

It's best not to follow dreams truly, but to wait while they take-off somewhere unknown, yet resembling something, a forgotten surface say. This might be why I didn't want to literally see 'a skeleton' or 'the devil's horns' or 'a model of molecules'. I could not dream past them. The bodies, there, in all their 'workings', were more than enough, densely ghosted.

As well, there were slides and film, and lovely use of light. When the woman talks to The Man about the dead body you realise that she stands close to him, and she (not he) is before a red lit square, a little magic. And at the beginning as the woman walks to her fall, her shadow grows on the back wall. And there's a voice-over. And lit glass shelves with tumblers, which reminded me of a Rosslynd Piggot painting, or installation, or was that by someone else. And a train, moving back and forward, a space in which to be awkward, alone.

And that is it: the body-awkward, wanting a fluid walk, casual stance, easy sit, quick wit: pleasure, not terror. The body's 'not at home', and too aware of that. The play tries to understand the perpetual 'lapse' that a self enters, that falling causes (or vice versa), a moment forever, a landscape. It reminds me of Blanchot's *The Madness Of The Day*, where he writes: "What work went on at the bottom of that earth! Who says it's cold. It's a bed of fire, it's a bramble bush, When I got up I could feel nothing. My sense of touch was floating six feet away from me; if anyone entered my room, I would cry out, but the knife was serenely cutting me up. Yes, I could become a skeleton. At night my thinness would rise up before me to terrify me. As it came and went it insulted me, it tired me out; oh, I was certainly very tired."

And thinking of film, I take this opportunity to pay homage to Marguerite Duras, who died on Sunday. She would have recognized the woman and her fall. And know why it is necessary to look over and over at the same thing. In *The Malady Of Death* she wrote: "You take hold of the body and look at its different areas. You turn it round, keep turning it round. Look at it, keep looking at it."

The play/painting/film provides a plane upon which other dreams (mine) must drift. Otherwise the space, stretched and glacial, remains empty, and the woman helpless. And this is not so, she's full to the brim with what she's seen and heard, and what she hopes and desires.

Toward the end The Man says he'd go down into a deep valley with her, and he'd carry her all the way back up, and enjoy the "long slow journey". But you imagine, even as she hears this, that she's gone. The stage goes black and all that's left is the word EXIT, glowing on either side. And EXIT is always a writing/reading cue.

Linda Marie Walker

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Real Time

Australian Youth Orchestra, Scriabin series, Adelaide Town Hall, Tuesday March 5

It had to be good, the AYO. All that talent, tenacity and temperament enthroned on a vastly extended stage, taming first Messiaen and then Scriabin. Mind you, things have changed. This is *fin de siècle* AYO, which is big business. Backstage at interval there were managers, mobiles and minders everywhere. But flashbacks are inevitable. Back in the 60s, when national music camp pianists doubled on percussion for the 'first orchestra', I and my bass drum became serious foreground material for the No. 2 camera lumbering in the wings of the Melbourne Town Hall for a televised performance of the Elgar *Cockaigne Overture*. Even more of a worry when John 'Hoppy' Hopkins suddenly launched the encore for which I had to wrestle the cymbals, with the result that the characteristic off-beat duplets in the celebrated *Danse des Merlions* became nervous triplet hiccups...

Not so nowadays. This orchestra has real percussionists; pristine in fact. Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques* was as precise and colourful as the acoustic allowed, although some of the birds seemed to have swallowed steroids before this particular performance. Rodney Smith, who stepped into the sunlight at very short notice, produced exquisitely refined sounds with a minimum of fuss and immaculate gesture, his professional pianism clearly paralleled by personal enthusiasm for the intricate and suggestively forthright bird-calls which he was creating. Messiaen himself noted that the work 'contains all the colours of the rainbow, including red'. I missed a few, but red was there in abundance.

Next item: reset stage, swap grands. This time the Town Hall piano (more depth, less treble penetration). Enter Jonathan Shin'Ar, at 32 a cool, clean-cut Adonis of the concert platform. No white tie and tails, just a simple white top under the mandatory black suit. No antics, no physical display; the Scriabin Piano Concerto in F sharp minor, Op.20 just 'happened'. Phrases were turned, passage work glittered, velvety textures and rich sonorities were effortlessly realised. Conductor and soloist seemed to agree on a healthy, controlled approach to a work which drifts in and out of formal romanticism rather like a mediocre film score, some scenes being more crudely edited, some effects more memorable than others. The long lines were convincingly drawn, especially in the slow movement where Gilbert Varga coaxed pianissimos of real substance from the strings. The writing guarantees that the main protagonist will disappear occasionally, which he did with aplomb (nothing aggressive about this Adonis), and at times some of the cast might have spoken more clearly, but overall the concerto was well-balanced alive and well.

Finally the *Poem of Ecstasy*, Op.54, developed by Scriabin in association with a literary text, excerpts from which were included in the program (proving that the composer's decision not to publish the poem with the score was probably correct). If there are works ideally suited for performance by a professional youth orchestra, this—along with the Cesar Franck Symphony and than the Enigma Variations—is surely one of them. After a nervous (excited?) opening, these young musicians rallied under Varga's uncompromising and tightly choreographed direction to deliver a performance brimming with commitment, energy and enthusiasm. They knew what they wanted, they focussed and they revelled in every last orgasmic second of it. Superb horn section (eight females, one male), stunning brass, disciplined wind and strong, sinewy, sensuous strings. What more could Scriabin have wished for? Aural stimulation *par excellence*.

P.S. Dinner at *Lyrics* after the concert where Gilbert and Jonathan translated into delightfully relaxed SNAGS both suitably impressed by their 'first time' gourmet roo. Appropriately percussive footnote as super-SNAG festival host BK rapped spoon on glass to grab attention, welcome guests and extend congratulations and good wishes all round. Great party, and it's only just warming up!

Di Weekes

Inje, Company Hildegard, Odeon Theatre, Norwood, March 6

In this tale told by Hildegard of Melbourne (not Bingen), clay lumps the stage, clay waiting to be pressed and formed, teased and sculpted, shaped within reedy walls that frame and contain...man, woman, children, culture. Clay becomes genitalia, fury, frustration, birth; it also functions as a chopping board for a watermelon. I am invited to take part in a sensory world of water, mud, blood, long journeys—an attempt to articulate an old Bulgarian story.

A clog dance by the five women gives an indication of how we are asked to experience the work: through its pulses, by the effect of feet arguing with each other about where they are going, what and who they are bound to, how exhausted or elated they are. But even in this promising aspect, the tempo is relentless, constantly forced, over-loud and insensitive to what needs to be focussed on or even heard above the cacophony to give some sense of punctuation. The slim pickings of text, meant to be anchors within this travail, are drowned by overactivity and repeated at shrill pitch, giving no respect for the curl and pungency of words finding their space...in English or any language.

In the end, we watch a gaggle of village girls gather and splash and lust and practice hysteria, whilst a single male figure holds their attentions to ransom—cuts, slashes, whips and bribes them with his posturing and unconvincing shows of power with a knife. In the end, one is left with the awful sense that this "hero" is a thug and his women so ground into their cultural roles that their habits, actions, responses are all preordained.

Zsuzsanna Sobosolay

The Adelaide Chamber Orchestra, Adelaide Town Hall March 4

Amidst the sustained dramatic intensity of Sofia Gubaidulina's "Homage to T.S. Eliot" and the exuberant madness of H.K. Gruber's "Frankenstein", one might be forgiven for overlooking the two short works by Australian composer Gerard Brophy. But both are small gems polished with great sensitivity by orchestra and harp soloist Marshall Maguire—from the carefully measured opening of "Forbidden Colours" to the haunting orientalist theme which dominated the premiere of "The Republic of Dreams". I even stopped groaning (RealTime Adelaide Festival#1, March 5) about the association between orient and otherworldliness. The sheer restraint in Brophy's work seemed to make room for an essential and measured irony alongside moody nostalgia.

The only piece with which I was familiar, Gubaidulina's, has already been acclaimed overseas and like much of her work is available on recordings. I confess T.S. Eliot's poetry has somehow passed me by without making an impression, but the music stands by itself as a complex and demanding exploration of time. The exciting interpretation by the orchestra and soprano Merlyn Quaife emphasised the human struggle expressed by the score rather than the moments, albeit brief, of resolution.

Gruber's "Frankenstein" almost defies description. with orchestral players and baritone Lyndon Terracini alike playing brightly coloured toy saxophones and whistles. Bursting brown paper bags punctuated what was at times a sublime score in what could have been a disaster. Instead it was rigorous delightful nonsense that conjured associations ranging from Edward Lear to Nino Rota scores for Fellini films. It was certainly bizarre and Lyndon Terracini's outrageously extraverted performance hit the right note. It was, dare I say, an *entertaining* exploration of the macabre humour to be found in many children's rhymes. Discounting a few puzzled or bored looks, it was, like the rest of the program, appreciated by the audience. You wanted to know though, who is this Gruber. whv has he been heard so little here and whv are the program notes so unhelpful?

Peter Bishop

Tensile Structures, Elder Hall: Kronos Quartet, March 4; Larry Sitsky, Russian Constructivism and the Solo Piano, Marshall Maguire, Five meetings with Harp, March 5.

Well away from the encoring crowds at the Festival Theatre and the buzzing mass of cultural curiosity at Red Square, the Elder Hall concerts offer tranquil respite. The mellow light falls through Victorian windows, the instruments are near, the performers address you as intimates. It's a full house for Kronos and they don't have much to say except to announce titles (no programs left). But their offerings are generous, culturally diverse and demanding. An avuncular Sitsky leads you gently through a frightening litany of composers turned exile or drunken party hacks by Stalin—each piano piece a moment of musical insight and vision caught before destroyed, beautiful in the hall's amber light. Marshall Maguire chats amicably about the harp repertoire, the attempts in the 20th century to "banish the nymphs of the nineteenth" taking us from Berio's now familiar, then radical departures to Donatini's remarkably distinctive, even alien waves of lyricism. These performers are seductive educators, compensating in the Sitsky and Maguire concerts for the unforgivable absence of proper program notes. (Elder Hall also featured the klezmer clarinetist Giora Feidman. Sydney theatre director Ros Horin reported virtuoso playing and, more seduction, an apparently reserved audience breaking into willing song at the slightest of prompting from the genial Feidman.)

The Kronos concert was like a trip through any number of their CDs—introductions to the new and the unfamiliar. How many of the audience would have heard of the American Harry Partch, his musical system built on unusual instruments he himself designed, and the neo-medieval theatricality of his performances? His "Two Ancient Greek Scales" sounded oddly conventional adapted for string quartet, but the juxtaposition of a clear near romantic melody with the subsequent languid but still lyrical distortion of something similar, made you really enjoy working at keeping it all together before the notes slipped away.

P.Q. Phan is a Vietnamese composer living in the U.S. His "Tragedy at the Opera" transformed oriental opera techniques and formulae into another curious string quartet, evoking everything from Peking Opera falsetto to string orchestra renderings of opera themes. It was not unlike listening to the soundtrack of a movie you haven't seen, and as such was highly suggestive if tonally lacking something of the richness of the originals.

Ken Benshoof's elegaic "Song of Twenty Shadows" touched the audience mightily, hearing Debussy, Delius and, in the darker moments, Bartok merge into sad unity, a prayer without an Amen. It also made Taverner's "The Protecting Veil" sound like a much bolder experiment than usually acknowledged. The selection from John Adams' "Book of Alleged Dances", accompanied by soundtrack, prompted foot-tapping with its sharp rhythms and a perpetual guessing game about what dance you were dancing in your seat—Appalachian jig, mid-west square dance, primitive tap-dance. These fictions, like something musical out of Calvino, concluded the concert with a reminder of how familiar much of this music now is but also at how far Kronos has taken their audience with them. It was not a young audience. Sadly, the encore was their popular arrangement of Hendrix's "Purple Haze", now beginning to sound like "The Hot Club out of Hell". Some of the audience welcomed the encore, some groaned "Not again", fearful of losing the intimacy and challenge of this twilight concert.

Sitsky's "Russian Constructivism" featured even less familiar names. He told us that these were composers working progressively on their own trajectories well outside the influence of Schoenberg, inspired by Scriabin but even then finding their own way, some prefiguring Messiaen and late modernism. You could also hear in them the kindred voices of Medtner, Rachmaninov and the Polish Godowsky, all virtuoso composer-pianists. In one cycle Sitsky admitted the requirement for constantly extended hands meant the pieces were almost unrehearsable. Polovinkin provided one of the earliest examples of prepared piano. Lorie, now enjoying a revived reputation, offered five short works, "Syntez" inspired by Italian Futurist Theatre. As Sitsky observed, if he hadn't told us when they were composed (1915), we might have thought the 70s or 80s. Being led into this 'black hole of musical history', as Sitsky called it, was sadly enlightening, another elegy. The second concert was held March 7. Sitsky challenges himself with this music but acquits himself with apparent ease.

Like Kronos, Marshall Maguire is the keen prompter of commissions both from Australia and overseas. Like Larry Sitsky he has a keen ear for musical history. This first of five concerts, like Kronos, moved us briskly across musical cultures. Solbiati's "Vezelay" an emotional, aesthetic and quite unliteral response to a cathedral town, played with the surfaces and tensions of the strings, yielding koto-ish twangs and glides juxtaposed with more familiar rumblings and sweet tinklings apparently inspired by light hitting the cathedral columns. Michael Finnissy's "Tchaikovsky V & XII" offered an accessible if heightened and theatrical lyricism, dance-like and a relatively conservative companion to Franco Donatoni's driving "Marches", the most idiosyncratic work on the program. Modernist influences were clear in a number of the works—grand 19th Century harp flourishes interrupted, isolated pizzicato bursts, a-rhythmic harmonics—sounding a familiar repertoire which Donatini avoided almost altogether, the Australian Gordon Kerry made almost lyrical and Elliot Carter made beautiful, partly by undercutting modernist ruptures with consistent use of the sustain pedal. Australian-based Elena Kats-Chernin's "Chamber of Horrors" was a witty, engaging deployment of many of the familiar suspense mystery and horror film and theatre music devices into a totality that refuses utterly and eerily to resolve. Like Donatoni's, though in a lighter vein, it is music that flows, placing you in it, taking you along, sometimes unwillingly, with it.

The Sitsky and Maguire concerts are part of Kosky's *Tensile Structures* chamber music series. The architectural analogy wasn't at all clear in these two concerts and neither performer bothered to address the issue in any detail. Perhaps it went missing with the program notes. The connection between the Russian pianists and Constructivism is not easy to see either, except at the level of innovation and political repression. Certainly in the harp program, Donatoni, and to a lesser degree Carter, made remarkable play of a sense of near and far and in and out, Maguire touching on astonishingly low but lucid volume levels. The woman in black next to me reading a library-worn copy of R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience* looked up, taken out of her book back into Elder Hall ... and, with the rest of us, into the harp and somewhere else. Like the Sitsky program this harp series is a rare experience, one to treasure.

Keith Gallasch

Pierre Henry & Son/Ré, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Camera* (1929), Her Majesty's Theatre, March 6

When Angels Margarit opened her hotel room 1109 window and the hotel world of buzzing airconditioners, gurgling water and sewage pipes, the blur of distant hotel cries and chatter was replaced by Victoria Square traffic and the movement of air and too many other noises far and near to identify, it was a surprise, a breath of fresh sound and golden twilight on the hills, a real city as opposed to the haunting universality of hotel rooms. When you meet Pierre Henry in Her Majesty's (where I suddenly recall as a child watching The Tintookies from the gods, hanging vertiginously almost directly it seemed over the puppets) you enter two worlds of urban sound transporting you far from 1996 Adelaide but without ever quite leaving it and the festival's urban preoccupations. The first is the pure suggestion of sound in Dziga Vertov's ground-breaking film of a day in the life of a Russian city. You could watch it in

silence, as I have, and feel its sounds, not only through the rhythmic movement of its images—horses, crowds, machines, miners, individuals dressing, sleeping—but especially through its editing. No wonder Vertov cuts away frequently to his editor at work on the film. Second, standing at a sound desk at the front of stage, below the screen is Pierre Henry, pioneer of musique concrete, manipulating sound levels, tone, volume and the choice of the multitude of speakers. His soundtrack is tightly synchronised with the film, presumably on master tape or disk, but there is little sense of preconception as the sounds shift across the theatre altering subtly and sometimes sharply the sense of where you are and what you are hearing and seeing. Near literal sounds of something like horse hooves on cobble stones quickly accelerate into something strange and driven. Sitar music opens the film but is soon layered over itself again and again to become something no longer eastern but still not western. What seemed a curious musical choice works. Where Pierre Henry succeeds (and Art Zoyd only sometimes did) is in his capacity to create sounds and patterns that make you look at ... and listen to a great film anew.

Keith Gallasch

No-One Is Watching, Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods, The Space, March 61

There are several days after a grand mal seizure in which you remain within the terrifying aura of the convulsion. During this period it is impossible to distinguish between the inner world emanating from your traumatised temporal lobes and the outer world, from which you can feel an overwhelming energy of aggression and anarchy. I have had to stop driving a car three days after a fit because it is filled with a mixture of shouts I cannot quite decipher and an unbearably loud low-pitched hum. I look out the window and the actions not only of people but of traffic seem fragmented and lacking the comfort of cause and effect.

Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods' *No-One Is Watching* takes place in such an epileptic world. The psyche, the society, the civilisation has been seized and is convulsing. Attempts are made by one or occasionally two of the figures within to connect with another, to express an emotion which has something to do with tenderness. Unfortunately, at the time, the intended receiver is not watching, possessed by a force that has little to do with love.

I came to *No-One Is Watching* with Vertov's film *Man With A Camera* and Pierre Henry's extraordinary musique concrete accompaniment fresh in mind. Like Stuart, Vertov fragmented his world—in his case, in camera and in editing. There feels (and almost is) a century difference between them, however. Vertov's fragmentation was his way of capturing the sheer energy of the early Soviet state. Stuart's fragmentation is the condition of a civilisation lying twitching on what Heiner Muller has called "these despoiled shores". Similarly, Vincent Malstaf's composition for *No-One Is Watching* is Pierre Henry forty years down the track—electronic, sampling, looping, nothing ever quite starting, nothing ever quite finishing, nothing distinct, epileptic.

This is what Jenny Kemp described in a forum as the landscape of the psyche. Bleak in its depiction, extraordinary to watch. The tiniest everyday gestures repeated reveal here not the inner resonances of Kemp's work but become the obsessive ingredients of a diseased state that gradually and always inevitably spreads throughout the entire group. And there is an inexorability to the rhythm. If the group was ever able to find some sense of physical unity (and this was always in pain or obsession and usually without any individual recognising the others) there was always one individual who broke the pattern, who became preoccupied with another state of being. This is nothing new in movement choreography. But here the power lay in the fact that the very actions that the individual was setting up in contradistinction to the group so often became the seeds for the next wave of disease that spread throughout. There is it seems no way out and the entrapment here lies in the very form of group dance structure itself.

The dance for me was at its most powerful either in the fragments of states of being when no complete image was achieved or in the moments of suspension of action when the stage was filled with the memory of past events, or with the threat of what was to come—most of the company standing, sitting or lying, witnessing in the movement of one of them the seeds of their destruction. It was least interesting when dance became representational and traded off the audience's empathy with what was being represented. It is always hard to watch madness being acted.

This is not dance as we used to know it. It is cruder, less abstract and more directly metaphoric than that. More power to it.

Richard Murphet

Excavation, The Last Days of Mankind, CPA and Mene Mene Theatre, Vision Warehouse, Hindmarsh, March 5

Australian culture is not strong on apocalyptic visions. Our moderation is born of a benign fatalism with its mythologies of defeated explorers (Voss is an interesting attempt to add European vision to Australian lack of it), victory in defeat (the Anzac legend), perpetual youthful sporting challenges to the old world where the apocalyptic vision is possible, signalling fears of the end of greatness or dreams of transcendence. We're not in either space yet. To visit this warehouse to see an account of Karl Kraus' nightmare vision of a dark apocalypse just down the road from The Jolly Miller where we'd sometimes go to drown our sorrows in beer after yet another West Torrens defeat, not far from the brickworks and the pugholes that sometimes burned in their depths, apocalyptically, through 50s summers to the olfactory tune of Westend brewery hops, was an unnerving experience. Perhaps after this festival of ecstasy and apocalypse we'll never be the same.

I'm not sure how much Karl Kraus has got to do with director Michael Kantor's vision, not a lot more than a broad framework I suspect, but *Excavation* is in the spirit of Kraus' least dialectical thinking and prophetic anxieties, the 'sledgehammer Kraus' a fellow audience member observed, didactic with a blunt instrument. The production offers vision as visual with relatively few words, a pity for Kraus the language obsessive, but there are many compensations, the chief of which is an astonishing sense of detail, precision and commitment in movement, costuming, acting and in the marshalling of a big cast of students training to be professional performers.

There is almost too much to relish in this mammoth 'puppet play' which two Beckettian figures create in a wasteland of the future (tons of dirt, a bunker) literally winding up a stage into shuddering life, replete with Brechtian curtains, and a cast of angels, generals, judges, war cripples popping up out of the floor (shades of the Maly Theatre's *Claustrophobia*). These spell out the history of a war, Kraus' vision of World War I as if it just kept going right on into a totalitarian state. This transition requires the characters to leave their stage and venture into the future of massed callisthenics, eugenics (as brutal, bloody castrations) and art as pure bland ideology. The performance is for the Lord, a mechanical figure from the future who, with his minions, dresses as if to ward off radiation. This is about as contemporary as the work gets. The vision, Kraus' and Kantor's, seems doggedly historical, even quaint, as foreign an apocalypse as ever. But it's a rare opportunity to see an interpretation exquisite in detail though not in overview of a text that would (if ever fully tackled) take days to perform. You get to feel some of its magnitude, aided in no small way by Kidney Art Ensemble's quite contemporary live original music. Kraus, living in Vienna, a city 'paved with culture' thought life had got to the point of parodying art. It's a pity Kantor didn't use this opportunity to use Kraus to see where we're going now.

Keith Gallasch