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ARTS

THEATRE

Sure-footed elegance

Jenny Kemp's new work is one of the most purely theatrical pieces we have seen, writes **Guy Rundle**

THE BLACK SEQUIN DRESS

Playbox
6 April

THE BLACK SEQUIN DRESS has come to Melbourne amid much expectation, mixed reports from its Adelaide premiere, and a general air of curiosity about what director Jenny Kemp could create, given a budget and a free hand.

Fans of Kemp's work, and nonnarrative theatre more generally, will not be disappointed. *The Black Sequin Dress* is a frequently brilliant, visually stunning, musically exciting, elegant piece of work, a showcase above all for the director's versatility and fluency.



The Black Sequin Dress is as much performance art as it is theatre.

Undeniably dramatic, the work's frustration of audience expectations of plot, character etc., via devices such as repetition, doubling, and a cold and minimally descriptive language, makes it as much performance art as theatre.

The core of the work is a quartet of women, all of roughly similar build, all clad in identical black sequin dresses, their roles alternating between that of separate persons and of the various personae of one individual. In a setting of sleek and austere greyness (high smooth walls form two sides of a triangle on stage and serve as both neutral space and the interior

of a nightclub) they go through a round of common experiences organised around the central experience of falling” - whether it be fainting, vertigo, ovulating (falling egg, the capacity to fall pregnant), falling apart, and a fall into self as the process of becoming whole, whatever the case may be.

Behind the foreground action, a rain carriage passes slowly back and forth from time to time, with the various personae - the four women and a couple of male characters - encountering each other in various permutations.

The carriage itself recalls not only Paul Delvaux, the surrealist painter whom Kemp acknowledges as an explicit influence, but also Einstein and his celebrated use of trains to exemplify relativity theory. And, of course, there are the endless intense moments in carriages and compartments that one associates with psychoanalysis (principally through the agency of D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*, which Kemp has previously staged).

Such rich, layered evocations gives the work a depth that is a counterpoint to its focus on psychological depth. The recurring train motif cross-flashes with sundry other moments; a Borgesian game of dice played by the two gangster-style men and one of the women, a giant white ball that floats softly around following a monologue about ovulation, and other striking motifs. Occasionally these are only minimally readable - a game of target practice involving a quote from the dadaist Picabia, and a basket of raw steaks being one such example - but they never lose their theatrical playfulness and visual wit.

Indeed, if there is a problem with this work, it is that there is too little of the relatively inexplicable; instead it seems overly keen to telegraph the interpretation of its own images. Unfortunately, whenever it becomes intellectually discursive, it veers towards triteness.

Ultimately *Black Sequin Dress* works best if one reads against these themes; taken thus it becomes one of the most purely theatrical presentations we have seen for some time. As craft goes, it is uniformly excellent, with Kemp’s smooth transitions from warm expressiveness to a cool and distanced minimalism well supported by striking design, forceful music, and a tight ensemble cast.