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A powerful piece on being female



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JENNY Kemp's visionary new play, "Call Of The Wild". A superb study of female empowerment, which she has written and directed, and is now previewing for Spoleto at The Church Theatre. opens with openings. Before us, we see women who are as tender as children waking in the early morning, beings of great beauty who could hardly be more open, for they are bare breasted, their nakedness telling us how susceptible they are.

Their voices rise and reach into us, cries and whispers coming from deep inside them, from the experience of being female. They are like old bells from long ago in ancient realms, calling to us. It can bring tears, within the first few moments, of release, as in a dream, which is the landscape for this extraordinary and powerful piece.

The opening dreamscape is set inside a painting by the French surrealist Paul Delvaux, it shows women as both goddesses, fine ethereal creatures. and also as bound fixtures, like furniture. It presents the essential dilemma of women, who are on the one hand adulated, and on the other, held as objects. In the background is a man stitched up in a suit, representing the restrictions, of male self-images as bound souls.



Powerful message: Margaret Mills and Victoria Egger in 'Call of the Wild'.

The play then moves, out, exploring and expanding the disparity, In sequences of great fluidity, made up of movement, music, dreams, and inner dialogue, blending past, present and future. all the time speaking to modern women, and men, too, about the images in which women are held, especially by men.

While it teaches much, the play Is not strident, though it criticises by example. There is no arch feminist laceration. Kemp does not hate men.

Its aim, is to reconcile, not divide. Kemp says of her intentions: "I'm not interested In the audience going out and feeling everything is such a problem. I am interested in them going out and feeling uplifted. and that there are possibilities."

For its part, the audience should not look for formal structure to the piece, for any storyline, or even set character pieces. Better to go with it, ride the wind and see where It goes, By presenting us with interior voices, Kemp is calling us to listen to our own. and experience that we should trust the inner self, the fountain of answers, the healing place where our darker and lighter sides can meet and merge.

There are plenty of rhythms in the piece that resonate. The imagery is dense. It Is gentle, savage, funny and sexual.

A male perspective finds great sensuality in the women, which is at once light and full. They move across the stage, forward and backwards and forward again, like spirit forms, with a liquid mobility, in the freedom of their truth.

The situations, in which we glimpse the people are both domestic and epic.

One is the archetype housebound woman. she is obsessive. cleaning the place as if it were her very own body, busy, busy, busy, as though if ever she stopped long enough from being the good little woman, she might have to face what she would perceive as her own emptiness. Then what would she do? Better to be busy, and scrub away the guilt.

Women constantly poise on the precipice of trying to please men in the name of love trapped In wrong notions, of romanticism.

There are, for instance, moments from fairy stories, giving examples of the way in which women have positioned themselves. In 'Cinderella', we see them struggling to put on the slipper so they can be claimed by their Prince Charming. Finally, in desperation, one of them cuts the end off her feet, but the prince is offended by all that blood.

From here, in a dreadful parallel descent, the scene switches to a study of the traditional compulsory removal of the clitoris in some countries, again inflicted by male myth-making. On the back screen is projected one of several messages applying to the need of women to break out and be themselves. It says “I have to know the other island in myself.”

We see women caught in the trap of pornography, women raped, women with phobias, women repressed by their fathers, by church male hierarchy, hysterical women, and coquettes, playing it so enticingly, so sweetly.

The female players are Margaret Cameron, Victoria Eagger, Margaret Mills and Ruth Schonheimer. There is one male, Mark Minchinton, who mostly acts as the deadening influence, the conductor of all that female energy into himself. The players fulfill their various moments with much sensitivity and style. Clearly they have worked hard to prepare. The piece took Jenny Kemp two years to put together.

Sound is very important in the production, with music composed by the concert pianist Elizabeth Drake. Sometimes the people speak in French, or Spanish, adding to the overall acoustic value.

The stage, designed by Jacqueline Everitt, uses the large area of The Church to advantage, filling it with both wide open and secret hiding places. Occasionally up above, a blind is raised, showing us someone in reflection. In their room without a view, a cage. It is as if another window in the mind has opened.

Presenting a piece so flooded with the inner side of life, the play, while very clever, runs the risk theatrically of some inaccessibility to a watching, listening, thinking, feeling audience.

But it never lapses into self absorption. We are all involved.

In the end, we see how women and men can live together in the light of understanding. We hear the language of lovers. Out of diversity has come unity. The balance is made.