

Taken from *The Age*, Friday April 12th, 2002 by Helen Thomson

Journey into the underworld



Lacey Taylor, Margaret Mills, Mark Minchinton and Natasha Herbert in *Still Angela*.

PICTURE BY ALAN

THEATRE STILL ANGELA

Written and directed by Jenny Kemp,
Playbox at CUB Malthouse until April 27
Helen Thomson.

With this production of *Still Angela* it seems appropriate to talk about the Jenny Kemp project, one that began with her adaptation and direction of D.M.Thomas' *The White Hotel* (1983), then *Good Night Sweet Dreams* (1986), *Call of the Wild* (1989), *Remember* (1993) and particularly *The Black Sequin Dress* (1996). There have been a number of distinctive productions directed for theatre companies from the state companies to the Pram Factory, Playbox Theatre and Anthill.

The unifying thread is surrealism, a mode of expressing the non-linguistic truths of the unconscious and the imagination. All her work is strongly visual, many earlier pieces drawing on the Belgian Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, for example. The project takes us on a journey, something her characters often also undertake. There is no end to this process of discovery, but a continual bringing to the surface of the conscious mind meanings from the mysterious depths of the unconscious.

One way we recognise these meanings is through dreams, and *Still Angela*, like so many of Kemp's works, uniquely uses theatrical resources to create a dream-like experience on stage.

The success of this venture depends upon audience recognition of the symbolism that replaces logic and words, and extraordinarily disciplined performances. As well, in this intensely collaborative work, Jacqueline Everitt's design, Helen Herbertson's choreographic input, and David Murray's marvelous

lighting design all contribute crucially to the production's powerful effects.

Some of this production's actors - Margaret Mills, Natasha Herbert and Mark Minchinton have performed in earlier Kemp works. They are joined by Felicity MacDonald, Lucy Taylor Ros Warby and Simon Wilton. Sympathetic ensemble work is particularly important in *Still Angela*, for four of the characters act the part of Angela, from the age of six to 40. The other characters play her mother, father husband and a waiter.

From the first, when the three adult Angelas sit on stage in identical blue dresses, the dialogue and action overlap presenting a multi-layered narrative or rather a psychological exploration of character that employs brief snatches of narrative.

Margaret Mills plays the oldest Angela, and her speech is mainly monologue. Like the heroine of *The Black Sequin Dress* who journeys to the underworld of a nightclub, Angela journeys by train to the desert and again to Adelaide. The desert provides her with some insights and these are suggested visually as a filmed backdrop, and then in a breathtakingly effective depiction of the desert at night.

Here Kemp's extraordinary talents as a creator of haunting painterly beauty is in evidence, and her ritualistic stage action, with its invisible corridors, its central pathway significantly built by her father, the game of chess played by child Angela with her mother, then 20s Angela with her partner Jack, all signal action within the mind. The text is important, too, yet often its subtle repetitions suggest more than the words themselves. Kemp is striving to connect with things that exist without a verbal language to express them.

In all her work it is the feminine that interests Kemp; this emerges in the emphasis on the relationship between Angela and her mother, and in the baffled masculine misunderstandings of Jack, Angela's partner. Only much later in her life does Angela, encountering Otto, a man from her past, connect at a deeper level with the masculine.

Angela's relationship with Jack is traced with great delicacy. It is made complex by its conflicting surges of desire and antagonism, remarkably conveyed in minimalist fashion, in a series of snapshots of early morning rushing to start the day. One pleasant surprise is its humour, which unexpectedly disrupts the tension of Jack and Angela's exchanges, for example.

This powerful work represents a unique aspect of contemporary local theatre, and Melbourne is fortunate indeed to have, in Playbox Theatre, an organisation and a fine venue where such extraordinary talents can be displayed and enjoyed.