

Surreal plunge into distant memories



Scott Theatre

La Joie de Vivre, the painting that inspired
'*The Black Sequin Dress*'

In Jenny Kemp's new work *The Black Sequin Dress* a woman gathers the courage to make her way alone to a table in a nightclub. Before she reaches it, something distracts her. She turns slightly, slips and falls. The action, which occurs in the first few minutes of the production and is then repeated throughout it, is used by the Melbourne writer and director to introduce the idea that seemingly insignificant events can have profound consequences.

In this instance the fall unlocks thoughts, memories and emotions within the woman that propel her on a journey into the far reaches of her subconscious. It also is the means by which Kemp and her extraordinary cast of six actors embark upon an intellectually and visually stimulating investigation of the female psyche.

The Black Sequin Dress eschews plot, narrative and character in the conventional sense. Kemp has acknowledged as a source of inspiration the paintings of French surrealist Paul Delvaux and the work is like a surrealist painting the viewer is invited to enter.

Dialogue, music, projections and voice-over seamlessly construct text and images that combine to form multiple layers of meaning the audience is compelled to revisit as it might a dream, piecing together fragments of information in an attempt to make sense of what it has seen.

That is not to say logic is absent from *The Black Sequin Dress*. It is just that Kemp has no interest in delivering it neatly arranged for our passive consumption.

The four female actors, Margaret Mills, Helen Herbertson, Natasha Herbert and Mary Sitarenos, represent different aspects of the woman. The two male actors, Ian Scott and Greg Stone, engage in conversations with them generally at odds with the purpose of meaningful communication.

Some of these exchanges take place in a mysterious train carriage that slides silently across Jacqueline Everitt's inventively simple set, which succeeds in hand with Ben Cobham's lighting in evoking the social but potentially alienating environment of a nightclub. Elizabeth Drake's music and ravishing sound effects likewise are a key element in creating the dream-like atmosphere.

Some things linger: the verbal and visual references to social conformity, references to Chaos theory and chance; a woman standing facing the audience with her arms around a skeleton; a naked woman lying motionless on the floor; the women flinging meat at a bullseye; actors striding purposefully across the stage with loaves of bread in hand; formally choreographed dance sequences in the nightclub; the humor hidden in many scenes. *The Black Sequin Dress* was commissioned especially for the festival. Kemp has given us a work rich in allegory and meaning designed to challenge every bit as much as it entertains.

Louise Nunn