

Review

The vision of Jenny Kemp

Dreams and the subconscious provide a rich source for the Melbourne playwright and director.

John Larkin reports.

The rehearsal room for Jenny Kemp's new play, 'Remember', that opened last night at the Gasworks theatre, looked like a cosmic playroom. It was in an old church in Gardenvale, which already had its own ghosts, with the Kemp collection adding several more layers of mythology.



Apart from the usual minimal stage props, there were copies of paintings by the French surrealist Paul Delvaux, a wall filled with a story board, and a huge list of the many states that people can pass through, all designed to help the actors with free association.

To work, perchance to dream: the dream state is very much a medium through which Jenny Kemp works. Picture: CRAIG SILLITOE

On the list were words such as “stabilising”, “centering”, “healing”, “changing” “grounding”, “sensing”, “intuiting”, “desiring”, “releasing”, “fighting”, “hating”, “controlling”, “feeling”, “thinking” and “haunting”. They had come from the responses of the actors and Kemp as writer and director to the situation on stage.

The effect of the rehearsal room, empty of people except Kemp, was a bit like being in a dream. The dream state is very much a medium through which Kemp works. With her understanding of the Jungian unconscious and her concern for life, she works on deep interior levels.

Her last piece, ‘Call of the Wild’, which was the best play of the 1989 Spoleto Festival (now the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts), was set in a landscape of everyday life, dream, myth and fantasy, taking the work far beyond the usual linear time restraints. It was about empowerment of individuals, specifically women, by making connection with the inner world. Its effect of taking the audience inside a vision was remarkable.

This approach has been a constant theme in her work, including her adaptation of ‘The White Hotel’ 10 years ago, looking at the inner side of a so-called disturbed woman.

It drew wide attention to Kemp’s singular talent, even though her theatre history goes back to 1977 when She directed ‘Peer Gynt,’ for STASIS with the Australian Performing Group.

Empowerment through the valuing of inner resources is again a preoccupation in ‘Remember’, but now there has been a significant move, she says.

It began with ‘Call of the Wild’. Kemp “wrote from myself, with a little bit of fantasy and historic material”. But then, a year later, she went to a writers’ workshop run by Irene Forties, who did ‘Abington Square’, and it was there the shift began to happen.

Kemp had started working with a deep dream, and had done a solid year of writing. Then she encountered a whole new emotional strand that came out of the workshop. It was to do with rape and murder, and its force “left me reeling.”

When asked if it became a nightmare for her, she said: “I prefer to see it in terms of catharsis. It’s a healing influence.”

The story in the play is about Moderna, a young woman who becomes obsessed with the idea of making some big money. This leads her into an illegal business alliance. Her boyfriend, who is on the dole, does not support what she is doing, but neither does he try to stop her.

Kemp said that in these two people were “how I see things at the moment”. Much of her work is concerned with the state of the world and the

way people treat each other.

The businessman with whom Moderna becomes involved brutally rapes her, and she in turn kills him. When the play opens, she is in a hospital bed, from which she attempts to come to terms with what she has been through, reliving her experience through dreams and fantasies.

Kemp said: “She’s very isolated, and in this very damaged state. I am looking at how her psyche deals with this. What is the impact of the trauma on this person, what resources does this person have to deal with this?”

“So, I’m looking at the processes of healing, which are called upon in this traumatised state.

“One of the problems of rape is: How does the woman ever receive a male lover again?” The woman is visited by her boyfriend in the hospital. “They have to start again. So, I’m interested in showing the extent of the damage to the psyche, on every level.”

She said she believed that the female element in the world had itself been raped, “and is in a very damaged state. And so, whenever I look at the male and female, I’m always interested in what the balance is. I feel that the forces are out of balance, and is very damaged. I also think that we are at a turning point.”

THIS is represented in the play by the victim shooting her assailant. “And that’s why violence in nature is starting to manifest. It’s like there’s a backlash and everything’s out of kilter. I feel that there’s been a tremendous blocking off of the subconscious, and that feels to me like part of the pain.

“What I’m very interested in conveying - through looking at the healing processes - is in communicating the extraordinary possibilities of the human mind and the psyche and the insight of it, and, in a way, being able to empower the individual.”

Asked how she was able to deal with carrying all the material for the play, she said that in a way it was also a healing process for her. But it was not therapy.

For rest and replenishment, she regularly walked by the sea, and went to the country a lot.

Dreams have always been an important part of her life. She remembered as a little girl telling the family: “I had this amazing dream last night...” .

She explained that part of the reason the female force was being blocked out in the world was to do with the way that time was organised.

She once said: “It’s as though we’ve got all the years to live our lives, but we’ve never got enough time to do anything. I find that strange. You think back to ancient times, when someone took a year to travel to visit their best

friend over the hills or write a letter which took a month to be delivered. All that is still there. Deep down I haven't come to terms with this race we are in. A crucial part of the psyche has been cancelled."

Time is a constant preoccupation with her. She did not start rehearsals each day until the players took the time they needed to get ready. In that way, the issues that arose in the production were dealt with naturally and smoothly.

"With my players I try to build a completely different world in terms of time - and that's why I worked nonnaturalistically - to allow both the play and the audience to have dream space."

"Quite often my experience of the theatre is that quite a large part of myself is left not involved, or, if it is, there's not much space for it. I mean the part of myself which perhaps might drift off, or dream, or think associatively in relation to what's happening on stage. And if I do drift off, when I come back, I've lost the plot."

She said she wanted to create space so members of the audience became active in relation to their own personal journeys through being there at the theatre. "With 'Call of the Wild', the most positive response that I remember is that people said they'd had feelings they haven't had for years, or that they'd found themselves in very unfamiliar feeling or thinking states.

"What I hope that means is that it's opening people up to parts of themselves which, because of time pressures or work or whatever, have been shut down a bit." She felt that daydreaming, which was linked to night dreams, was also, like them, very important problem solving.

"In fact, if you can't actually imagine something, it's actually very hard to do it."

'Remember' is at the Gasworks theatre, Albert Park until 17 April.