

tuesday, 17 august 2010

madeleine: re-animate the image



In the beginning of Black Sequin Dress' production of Madeleine, the self-titled central character is infected by a rampaging, yet very private experience of madness. She sits off-centre at a broad, sacrificial table, tormented by an omnipotent male voice that booms throughout her cranium in a tone of malevolent sophistication. Later to be manacled by the moniker of 'The Minister', this inner-voice is a slithering expose' of Maddy's twisted desire for sexual relief, within a perceived sense of Christian shame. The inner-voice inquires of Maddy as to the whereabouts of an elusive Royal Family. Immediately upon doing so, there occurs behind Maddy the sinister appearance of 'The King', 'The Queen', and 'The Princess'. This allusion to Lewis Carroll's subterranean phantasmagoria is difficult to miss. Far from being a wonderland, however, Maddy's presence in the family home is more that of an Alice in chains. Proceeding a soft transition of infernal light, this royalty is then reduced to the professional middle class. Maddy's interior world is replaced by that which is actual, and The King, The Queen, and The Princess, become Alex, Madeleine, and Charley. We are in the family home, and dad, mum, and sister cannot contain their awkward delight in preparing to celebrate their schizophrenic sibling's birthday.

Maddy's perceptive, yet pre-occupied sister, Charley, offers birthday cake to other family members by resting non-existent serves upon palms substituting for plates. It's mime, of course; and although an awkward moment in the play, two reasons emerge for this performance strategy. Maddy's schizophrenia is partly a response to her place within a family where unintended neglect has long since become residual. Mother Madeleine is a figure symptomatic of her daughter's mental illness. But she channels her potential for insanity into an aloe vera business, that, if successful, will elevate the family toward a trouble-free lifestyle in New York. Sister Charley, although caring and more lucid than her parents in her attitude to Maddy, is constantly reassuring a needy partner by mobile phone, and under pressure to return to work. But it is Maddy's daddy Alex, who, with the best (conscious) intentions of any father watching a daughter's health deteriorate, has become so absorbed by Maddy's delirium, that he now role-plays the figure of The King; a phantom who resides nowhere else but in Maddy's tormented imagination. It is pop-psychology at its most absurd. If a psychotic event can be defined as a loss of personal sovereignty, or, the dissolution of a border within an individual's mind between that which occurs in the actual world, and that which is entirely imaginary, then I am enjoying Jenny Kemp's re-defined approach to theatremaking. Maddy, on the other hand, embraces the clutches of The Minister. Her attempt at producing the unconscious is instead, a self-reflexive tango with the monster that is Thanatos; or, total psychosis.

Later, Maddy is played across the same sacrificial table upon which her family have attempted to celebrate her birthday. Her excruciating orgasm upon that table is a reminder of the social dilemma confronting families in contemporary society. For many, institutionalised religion has lost the power of salvation, and children necessarily warped by the perplexities of pubescence are vulnerable to mental illness. But just as Maddy's madness is a consequence of several social problems combined into a distorted perception of the Garden of Eden, so too is Kemp's play an elaboration upon an image elicited from Leonardo Da Vinci's painting, The Last Supper. Maddy enters from the shadows carrying a fake rifle. She wears on her head a white veil, and claims she is Mary Magdalene. When Alex refuses to maintain and further participate in Maddy's delusion, the border in her mind between the actual and the imaginary completely dissolves, and she murders her father. Maddy's tragic attempt at re-animating the spiritual void that surrounds her, in contradistinction, is also Jenny Kemp's continuing renewal of her theatre practice. The paradox of this renewal is that by returning toward a central point on the theatrical continuum, Kemp takes a major risk. Modest, concentrated, and minus the spectacle of her previous work, in an age of multimedia tiredness this renewal is achieved by a disciplined performance; one that successfully re-animates the image.

Madeleine

Writer-director: Jenny Kemp

Dramaturge: Richard Murphet

Performers: Nikki Shiels, Ian Scott,

Margaret Mills & Natasha Herbert

Movement: Helen Herbertson

Voice: Richard Murphet

Set & lighting design: Ben Cobham

Lighting realisation: Jenny Hector

Costume design: Harriet Oxley

Production & operation: Frog Peck

Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall

August 3 - 8, Melb.

Photography: Jeff Busby