

Madeleine

keith gallasch: madeleine; august:



Madeleine
photo Ponch Hawkes

I'VE EXPERIENCED JENNY KEMP'S WORKS AS MORE AKIN TO CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE THAN CONVENTIONAL THEATRE IN THAT THEY DON'T CONFORM TO THE CONSTRAINTS OF PLAYWRITING (WHICH CAN AND DO GENERATE GREAT DIVERSITY OF FORM), INSTEAD THEY REALISE AND EXPLORE, WITH GREAT ACUITY AND INTENSITY, STATES OF BEING THAT DISSOLVE TIME AND PLACE WHILE MULTIPLYING AND OVERLAYING PERSONALITIES. IT'S PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING THEN THAT KEMP HAS MOVED ON TO ENGAGING WITH SPECIFIC PATHOLOGIES—BI-POLARITY IN KITTEN AND SCHIZOPHRENIA IN HER LATEST WORK, MADELEINE, FOR MELBOURNE'S ARTS HOUSE AT THE NORTH MELBOURNE TOWN HALL.

Of all of Kemp's creations (save Kitten which I didn't see; I'm told the extreme state it generated was apparently overwhelming for some), Madeleine is the one

that appears to come closest to conventional play making. It unfolds a linear narrative that moves resolutely to a climax, its characters are briskly delineated and their motivations transparent. The dialogue is spare and direct, and largely stripped of Kemp's usual poetry except at certain key moments of schizophrenic revelation. But, no less than her previous works, Madeleine compels us to enter an unfamiliar state of consciousness. This is achieved with a lean, fable like narrative, stark shifts between two worlds (the real and a schizophrenic's fantasy), the distressful overlapping of these, a breathtaking central performance and, not least, Kemp and her designers' scenographic virtuosity.

Kemp, Ben Cobham and Bluebottle create an immersive, light-sculpted, closed circuit of a world governed by a young woman's fragile state of mind. It's like looking into a black hole (no-one does black better than Bluebottle). From this emerges a square of light not quite of a standard colour, eerily misty on the edges. Here the woman encounters her family as themselves and then, gliding out of the dark in golden crowns, as a tyrannical royal family. In this, her otherworld, she also hears the voice of a Minister who relentlessly, if unemotionally, tests and instructs her. Before long he speaks to her while she's with her family, throwing real world conversation even further out of kilter.

The sense of immersion is heightened by 19 year-old Madeleine's construction of her consuming reality, fusing childhood and adolescent images that draw on fairy tales (a pin prick, a royal family), *Through the Looking Glass* ("Off with her head!"), mental arithmetic tests (built around the 28 days of the menstrual cycle) and the alphabet (she is planting a real world garden based on the first letters of plant names). But it is religion that makes her world cohere—the Pope, the Bible, the drive to become a Bride of Christ and to create a second Garden of Eden. The fragility of this construction is threatened all too easily—the birthday gift of a purple cardigan cannot be accepted (only the Pope can wear purple) and panic ensues when her father removes blackberry bushes to improve the garden, thus eliminating B.

What is frightening is the insistent way in which Madeleine takes up elements of her family life and weaves it into her fantasy—why is her mother’s name, Madelaine, the same as hers; why does she have her grandmother’s hands—and not her own; how did her two year-old twin drown, is her mother a murderer; why was she born backwards; is her sister Charley the real princess and she an imposter? Unanswered, these questions leave her “just black inside.” Either there is no way they can logically be answered or the subject is off-limits. Denial, in fact, is central to the psychodrama: both parents refuse to acknowledge the seriousness of Madeleine’s condition, the mother ignoring it in favour of her business ambitions, the religious father sheltering his daughter, inadvertently reinforcing the fantasy. The sister, Charley, returned home after three years, has no way of breaking through her sister’s resistance or long-induced parent-child patterns of repression. Only Madeleine moves through and beyond these binds, with terrible consequences, completing herself, re-named with a G as Magdalene, in her Garden of Eden.

Jenny Kemp’s Madeleine is an undidactic attempt to help us understand a mental state, a version of schizophrenia (not a condition reducible to any universal). She achieves this by revealing the inexorable logic of the girl’s fantasising and its result when brutally, but innocently, applied to the real world. Visually the work correspondingly verges on the claustrophobic as we watch Madeleine quiver in the near dark, orgasming to become a Bride of Christ, or later writhing and shuddering, screaming with fear. Nikki Shiels’ Madeleine rapidly alternates between oblivious innocence, tunnel vision determination, hard logic, delirium, panic and fear, all encased in child-like vulnerability and, after all her tests and suffering, certainty. It’s a remarkable performance from an actor in her early 20s.

As the other family members, Ian Scott (father/king), Margaret Mills (mother/queen) and Natasha Herbert (sister/princess) capture the denial and helplessness that is their characters’ sorry lot. Kemp’s warning is that Madeleine’s fantasy world cannot be undone while the family’s world is just another such closed circuit. At the end of the front row, his back to us, Richard

Murphet, quietly intones the insistent words of the Minister, his placement implicating the audience as fellow administrators of Madeleine's world, which is not to forget that the Minister is 'really' only ever the agent for Madeleine's unconscious ventriloquism. The totality of conception and the potent imagery of its realisation make Jenny Kemp's account of the power of a deeply thwarted and flawed imagination chillingly memorable. It should be seen more widely.

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