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PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

JONATHAN MARSHALL speaks with playwright and director JENNY KEMP and enters the surreal, multimedia world that defines *Still Angela*



The collaboration between Jenny Kemp and Helen Herbertson has produced some memorable theatre. Writer/director Kemp can trace her interest in expanded naturalistic theatre and abstract poetry back to the wild old days of the Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory. Choreographer/performer Herbertson on the other hand worked with Victoria's longest running contemporary dance company, Danceworks, before serving as artistic director 1989 to 1997. The artists' most recent collaborations were *Delirium* (1999) and *Descansos: Resting places* (1996), two extraordinary chiaroscuro dance-theatre pieces. *Still Angela* though is closer to their earlier, highly praised production *The Black Sequin Dress* in that Angela developed from a theatrical/poetic text later informed by movement and performance.

Talking to Kemp in particular is like listening to poetry. She tends to drift into ellipses and metaphors. One must heed carefully the undertone of the discussion, and meaning is conveyed at least as much through what is already assumed as what is later spelled out. In an uncharacteristically explicit moment Kemp describes *Still*

Angela through an amusing, banal example. “So If I say to you: ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ “ Kemp relates, “you’re going to say: ‘Yes, thank you.’ The cue in your mind as a performer would be tea. But in the theatrical world that were dealing with, it’s possible that the image of your mother might be substituted in your mind for the word ‘tea’. So at that point we might have the mother move across the stage, or have a piece of music (by long term collaborator and APG veteran Elizabeth Drake), which is related to the other. So we’re dealing with memories coexisting with future imaginings as well as with the present and so on.”

Like most artists, Kemp and Herbertson are reluctant to ally their work too closely to any particular historic art movement. The abstract mental allusions described above however have caused their shows to be compared to the exploration of the unconscious, dreams and the sexualised family which was a primary element of Surrealism, or alternatively the dark, vaporous imagery and troubling psycho-sexual themes of Expressionism. Herbertson however prefers to avoid such loaded terms, simply noting that her interests revolve around “placing an ordinary world inside a theatrical one. To do that you need to employ devices like theatrical imagery, the relationship between image and sound, or image and movement. It’s really whatever it takes to get things across, which can mean stripping the aesthetic back towards minimalism or going instead towards more naturalistic performance at times.” Kemp adds that one concern that links her with Herbertson (and Indeed earlier avant-gardists) is an interest in “the relationship between the concrete and imaginary worlds.”

Descansos and *Delirium* were more abstract than *Still Angela* in that they lacked dialogue. The focus of this show though is upon the clearly Identifiable central character of Angela (Margaret Mills wonderfully anchoring the production in this role), giving this piece a more narrative quality. There are however two other speaking performers playing Angela, as well as another two women on stage, all of whom at times reflect aspects of her personality or thoughts. Although the media release describes the show as a multi-sided portrait, I put It to Kemp that the show offers something closer to a procession of quite different potential portraits, rather than simply several different perspectives of a single, unified woman undertaking a specific emotional journey. Some of my associates for example identified the unnamed man Angela talks to near the finale as her new lover, while I Initially interpreted him as being her father. The production is ambiguous in this respect, and in some sense the man could be both of these (or possibly neither). Kemp responds with equanimity that: some spectators might take him to be one thing because they find It more provocative. It’s more interesting to them so they chose to let him be that. She is however unconcerned with resolving such debates. We don’t want to nail it down to any solid linear expectations for the audience,” she explains

“We want to encourage them to take a different approach which, as you say, might result in many different journeys.” Watching *Still Angela* is therefore like looking at a number of frames from a lost film. Spectators must join the dots themselves in their own inimitable ways.

This sense of multiple periods from a woman's life, of different realities and perspectives coexisting on stage, can be compared to a dissonant yet somehow cohesive symphonic composition. Each performer sketches a moment or mood from Angela's (or Angelas') life and the rhythms or emotions which are produced through their speech and movement are laid onto those of the other characters and theatrical elements. Kemp explains that she does not write with vocal rhythms in mind but there is nevertheless “a pulse” to her writing. “My pen tends to jump down to the next point There is one thing, which triggers another thing, and then another. It has a sense of interruption.” The recitation of these words can produce fairly specific rhythms which Herbertson then helps the performers interpret and organise I haven't consciously considered their breathing (although that is part of my own choreography). What I have tried to do is provide something that they can work within. Some of the gestures are quite specific” - such as an early section where the performers move along illuminated corridors, preparing to go out for the day- “but there's often a separate emotional thread which they are on at the same time. So I've tried to setup a physical grid that the performers can inhabit.”

Rhythms, physical grids, dreams, memories (as well as some Fellini-esque comedy) - *Still Angela* may not conform to what usually passes for drama but to quote one of the masters of world theatre: “There are more things in heaven or earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Still Angel. is on at the Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, 11 Sturt Street, Southbank until Saturday 27th April. For bookings, phone 9685 5173. Tickets 840.501730. Student rush tickets are also available.