

REVIEW: The Package

Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs

Friday 13 November 2015

A hospital bed is stationed like a solitary figure in the centre of a considerably sized stage. Already a sense of aloneness is established, a world stripped back and emptied. When the house lights dim a figure appears, fitted with the mask of an old woman. Her legs bound in support stockings, she navigates the space with a cane that taps the stage, occasionally slips on the shiny surface, making the world feel slightly unstable, unconcerned.

This opening of *The Package* – conceived by Katelnd Griffin, co-created with Kristy Schubert, Robbie Hoad and Unanyntji Scales (with this version directed by Conor Fox) – takes its time. Supported by a mesmerizing score, we are soon drawn into the effort of basic tasks such as walking and mounting the bed with the support of a cane.

I did not see the developmental showing of this work last year in the more intimate Totem Theatre but knew it was well received in this space. There is something vintage about both puppetry and small theatres and they were apparently well coupled. Yet what was delightful in this rendition of the work was the masterful use of the significantly larger space of the Araluen Theatre, where it played for one night only.

A good design, they say, goes unnoticed. Well I did notice it but maybe because I was also concerned about the space, which might be described as daunting: a proscenium arch sitting somewhat aloof from the considerably sized auditorium where anything other than grand gestures runs the risk of not reaching its audience. The solitary bed was indeed dwarfed by the space but this only served the work – the magnitude of a single life is at once minimized, made insignificant in the global space. A good design, I would add, can trick you into thinking the work miraculously fits the space.

And if austerity serves the opening scene of a life stripped back, the stage is soon populated by props in the form of boxes, or rather ‘packages’, that are delivered in frenetic pace by a pair of posties. The first package is met with resistance by the woman, who soon succumbs to the current of memory contained therein, despite all of its threats to pull her under. Once this first package is undone, more packages appear from the ‘sky’, and more and more delivered, until the stage becomes not so much cluttered as filled with cardboard boxes, until the woman’s bed is beautifully framed by towers of boxes, each we assume, filled with memories that comprised a life. From empty to full, we have experienced a subtle theatrical shift, and the individual life no longer seems so empty, so futile. These boxes later double as screens for a series of projections, this multi-functionality part of the cleverness of the design.

And so the packages her life are unopened again, unraveled before us through

puppetry, animation and physical movement. The overall effect is charming, visually delightful and captivating in subject matter. After all, we may all be here someday.

If the start of the performance is deliberately slow and melodic the mood is interrupted, suddenly, violently, by the entrance of two performers, dressed as medical staff; a shift in tone magnified by the dramatic change of music. The male wields a tape measure – and I say *wields* as there is something tool-like, weapon-like, in the way he uses it, measuring the woman obsessively, pushing her down each time she reaches forward to pull the blanket over her. The female figure is jittery, anxious, almost set into a spin each time the woman reaches forward. And so they go about measuring, prizing and poking, writing notes, thwarting the woman's reach to her blankets. Click click goes the amplified tick of the pen as they check off an invisible set of criteria.

It is interesting to note on the program that Katelnd Griffin, who plays the old woman and who conceived of the original idea and characters of *The Package*, is herself a doctor. This somehow gave weight to the representation of the medical staff as robotic, uncaring, almost inhuman beside their human subject. This was clearly a harsh world to inhabit. But while the movement of the performers worked to counter the movement of the old woman there was a sense that it may have run too far in one direction so as to run the risk of blurring its intent. Why such rigidity? Such brutality? Or was it disinterest simply amplified? While theatre often relies upon amplification I wondered if it may have been more powerful had the movement been more nuanced.

The performers, first present without puppets and, always without words, were reliant upon choreography to tell the story. Everything they did mattered, was needed to move the narrative along. This left no margin for ambivalence. And yet I was not always certain of the director's intent. Why, for example, did the female medical staff display such anxiety, anxiety that seemed to sit at boiling point throughout, but never reach resolution? When the posties appeared, their movement was once again rigid, stylized, their use of the space mathematical.

This worked well enough as a reflection of posties moving up and down the street grids of suburbia, but why so staccato, why so unsmiling? When I ask that question I don't mean this was not a directorial option, but its meaning was not entirely apparent.

Where the movement excelled was in the manipulation of the puppets. Watching the performers animate these figures was mesmerising. I was spellbound while Schubert flapped the 'wings' of a cardboard package rhythmically across the old woman's room as I was entranced by her transference of energy into the bird puppet who would appear and reappear throughout the piece, a harbinger of death.

The skillful collaboration of Schubert and Hoad both animating a baby puppet

was entrancing. All around me I heard sighs of delight as they worked together to bring the baby alive until it existed as another player on the stage and the puppeteers disappeared. And yet no, they didn't disappear at all really, it just seemed that way. This was not black light puppetry but with technicians present and breathing and in the light. And there was something so beautiful about this. As if the performers stepped back, gave over their own space on stage for the puppets to have life. And like all good performance their own degree of investment directed not only our gaze but our focus. If at times we noticed them, saw them working, it was like watching loving parents seeing their children walk for the first time. So absorbed were *they* in their subject's task, that *we* could not but shift our own focus quickly back to the puppets, wanting like good parents, to see them succeed.

The puppets themselves were compelling – the bird of death, the baby, the child and the pregnant woman – each had a grace about them that stemmed from the considerable craftsmanship that went into their making. Beautiful objects alone, they were somewhat reminiscent of antique dolls, which could also very readily be animated.

Also visually stunning were the animations, based on the illustrative work of Griffin. Apparently not in the previous incarnation of the work, the visual imagery seemed integral to populating the world of the piece with the memories, spirits, and stories that comprised the woman's life. For the most part the visuals were projected onto a screen behind the bed, which was less satisfying for me artistically than the box screens, but did work as a central, highly-visible screen where memories danced as if in the mind of the woman on the bed. The back wall also worked as a screen for some low-tech torchlight shadow play, from the old woman's attempt to soothe the baby with hand puppetry to projections of static silhouetted pictures in the pages of a book the old woman paged through. Both of these basic applications of puppetry – light, shadow, screen – were charming, each disarming in its simplicity.

Once it found its way into the theatre visual technology has been hard to keep out. Once relegated to the realm of hybrid theatre and multidisciplinary artworks, it is now as common as light and sound. This doesn't mean it always works and so often it is unnecessary. But here it was integrated, both visually and dramaturgically. The animations also provided more movement to the piece overall, a counter to the limited movement of the old woman. The recurring underwater visuals however for me needed explanation or reason, hinting to a story which remained elusive.

This sense of hinting at something that is never explained or resolved is possibly the area that most needs attention for the satisfaction of this work. It was there in the animations, and it was there in the presence of what some called monsters and which I read as death – dark foreboding shadow puppets which bore some likeness to the Indonesian Wayang kulit. They appeared, menacing, then moved on. But then there were images in the picture book she could not face, images in the animations of a woman being swallowed by a

clam... References to this darkness appeared and reappeared, but were never explained, and while this hinting gave the work its narrative tension, it needed resolution. If the details of her life are not clearly rendered, the risk is to paint a life with broad brushstrokes only, which would appear counter to what this creative team seem to be proposing – that a single life is teeming with stories often overlooked in an aging body. The more specific those stories are, the less mystery, the more convincing the argument. And ultimately the more powerful the show.

The Package is truly a compelling work, rich in subject and varied in tone and theatrical elements. Quality abounds. When I left the theatre I felt that I had not only been charmed, but stirred deeply. I can imagine this show being ‘unpacked’ in multiple venues, intimate and grand, and I can see how it might speak to a variety of audiences. And I can see their faces already, smiling with delight, swept up in the magic.

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