



Dance

Dramatic interiors

It may be expected that a piece of modern performance “inspired by Surrealism art and the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) technique—used by psychologists to study children’s inner world” would have rather a lot going on. *Dry Room* was—if one tried to construct a coherent narrative from the intense, Magritte-styled dance-and-music vignettes—dense and bewildering. But the quality of dance more than made up for moments of absurdity (a unicorn head, a large pair of foil scissors chopping up a character). *Dry Room* bills itself as being about three characters, who “to escape from their haunting experiences ... embark on a journey of self-discovery and encounter many demons of the past”. However, it seemed more apt, and comprehensible, to read the performance as three aspects of one conflicted self. And it is important to acknowledge that comprehensibility is not necessarily the point of a surrealist performance drawing on the tradition of “the theatre of the absurd”.

An androgynous young woman dressed in a school uniform sits at a desk with precision, clearly attempting to be “normal”, to focus on her work. Another character, in red, approaches, struggling to sit at the neighbouring desk. This desk is “handicapped” with three legs, and will not remain upright. The character in red is another young woman, whose brilliant expressions of glee and playfulness often tip into naughtiness and frustration. There are abrupt moments of cruelty as play spills into abuse, as clapping turns into smacking. It seems that the character in red is a younger aspect of the damaged self. Later, a third character, withdrawn and sad, begins to weave itself in with the two. They could be friends; they could be different aspects of one psyche. A cellist plays exquisite music.

Dry Room is weird, and beautifully performed. The dancers are a marvel to watch, as they embody different selves (or aspects of the self), different ages, and emotions. There are nursery rhymes and songs as the performance moves back and forth between adulthood and childhood. There is a scene that is both extraordinarily strange and also extraordinary, when one dancer is dressed in a nude suit, with a lampshade on her head, and dances a brilliant and crazy piece, supplicating to the audience. It rightly draws awkward laughter, for it is clearly a pained lampshade (and who would think of a pained lampshade?). The demonstration of emotional angst set within domestic interiors is especially poignant throughout the show. People become objects, which become people; inanimate items bear witness to psychological drama, so much that they overflow with emotion themselves and begin to creep and writhe around rooms.

Vignettes blending dance with live cello worked best, while other recorded music sometimes jarred with what might have been a more seamless performance. Extreme costumes sometimes distracted from the dance, such as a grey outfit with enormous ruffs, while other times the costume was the very point, such as a dramatic black dress at the end, with the dancer violently wrapping her head with luminescent-pink rope—the obfuscation of the face a direct reference to Magritte. Sometimes, dancers wore simple striped pyjamas. One costume was a tissue-fine pink silk dress, perfectly tailored. In some scenes, dancers’ shadows were projected onto white drapery in the background. In these simpler, pared-back settings, the show was at its most emotive. In a performance of many references, sparsity spoke most clearly.

We are told, in the show’s description, that these survivors of childhood trauma are distinct characters: “Natalie, a victim of child neglect and sexual abuse; Christopher, [who] lost his parents in an accident; Jack [who] suffered domestic violence from his alcoholic parents”. But *Dry Room* works best not knowing such specifics, and encountering the multi-faceted, multi-genre performance in a less prescriptive manner. For it is emotive, moving from scenes of isolation and despair to puppy-ish play, turning on a dime into bullying or aggression. Considering these whip-quick emotions in light of childhood trauma or child development, *Dry Room* works. Watching a dancer in an elegant dress begin popping balloons is jarring and strange, but perhaps illustrative of anxiety, of the desire to appear normal when in fact one feels distinctly out of place.

Kelley Swain



Dry Room
By Eldarin Yeong Studio
Currently on tour through
September, 2018

