

# FROM POP-CULTURE DANCE/THEATRE TO POTENT DANCE OF UNEASE, DISSATISFACTION AND TRANSFORMATION

## [Late Show #2](#)

Backlit Productions & Cat Ruka

at TAPAC Theatre, Western Springs, Auckland

From 8 Oct 2009 to 10 Oct 2009

[1hr]

Reviewed by Jack Gray, 10 Oct 2009

The *Late Night Show #2* explored developing choreographic expressions of some socio-political undercurrents exposed in contemporary Aotearoa.

The first half of the show was from BackLit Productions who contributed three works-in-progress excerpts.

*Eye to Eye* by Shannon Mutu began with a bevy of girls in slinky black dresses and heels. Patent black handbags slung over their arms in true 'Ponsonby Road' style, they mime the actions of waiting impatiently for a bus, hailing a cab or talking excitedly on a phone.

Vying for attention, they push and jostle for position, morphing into undulating movement before regathering. Annabelle Harrison then launches into a lurid lip synch to a karaoke love song while the bitchy girls grapple, pull at and try to demean her.

The main sequence is a series of arrhythmic positions, with quick squats and sweeping and placed arm movements that flow in cannonic layers. Sophistication is required from the performers' presence, as the piece demands more weight, strength, fluidity and control.

BackLit show they are currently in progressive stages of refining their own individual skills and developing cohesive group energy.

Janine Parkes' *Calculated* starts with a starkly lit series of poses (Lucy Miles and Georgie Goater) atop a table. Guitar thrash electric sounds reverberate then dissolve into pockets of silences and a bell gong.

Miles wraps a long extension cord partly around her turning slowly and shifting her focus inwards. Goater stands rigidly like a giant China doll next to a desk light, bending, straightening and

dismantling both her and the lamp. She reminds me of cult movie *Cherry 2000* with her android like focus and impressively long limbs.

The duo frantically type into calculators, dictating with straight faces an inventory of exponentially increasing numbers and items: "89 i-pods, 1000 cans of deodorant, a million trillion dollars." Walking quickly and rearranging the props in the space, it is fast with trips, shifts and falls.

At times disjointed in its overall picture, this work has some key elements that could do with isolating, yet show a solid start and progression on from past works.

The third and last offering from BackLit is *Love Things* by Annabel Harrison. Walking into a side light, the dancers enter slowly from the wings wearing white and skin toned variations of tops, skirts and pants.

They pull on long wires connected to appliances like a TV or video, moving meditatively in contrast to a hard hitting beat. The work then progresses to a fast paced exploration of the items in space and in relationship to each other.

It seems relevant to mention that the work of the company seems to occupy a blurry space somewhere in-between pure dance and theatre. Defining this aesthetic will help serve to intensify the messages inherent to their philosophical interests in themes of consumerism, capitalism and social dehumanisation.

The second half was a 25-minute solo by Cat Ruka called *Playing Savage* presented originally as part of her Dance MA research.

An exquisitely beautiful image matches the girl from the publicity: a sensual/sexual, bare-breasted and piupiu-(flax skirt)-wearing tigress/wahine sitting on the edge of a chair, juxtaposed with serene classical piano from Chopin.

Gaping her body into extreme, predatory and defiant postures, she is lithe, lyrical and articulate with an arching spine. Her gaze is penetrative and confronting as her eyes stare from behind a painted skull on her face (like Mexican Day of the Dead).

Sitting in a Pania of the Reef-like stance, this classic repose falls into dark caverns inhabited by Dusky Maidens. We realise this is a calculated presentation of colonised stereotypes (tribal figurine, black and white minstrel, old-time movie damsel in distress).

Like a Dying Swan number from a quirky ballet pantomime, she overthrows this fragility in a repetition of falling backwards and rippling upwards with animalistic and sexualised overtones. Hip hop music then unexpectedly breaks this construct as she dons a velvet dress and rips into an urban

Haka/Krump as a frenzied expression of ihi and rebellion.

Drawing wet fabric from a bucket and wiping the skull paint off her face, we realise it is a Tino Rangatiratanga flag that she wraps around herself, transforming into a wet, visceral Maunga (mountain) flecked with snow and blood.

Lighting candles for the dead before cradling a Māori doll, her ahua (appearance) evokes an opening up into the culture while upholding of the place of women. Sello-taping this 'Manu' to her puku, we see unspoken stigma, ideals and perceptions.

Staunchly putting on a black leather jacket (with skull patch) and black shades, she dangles a ciggie from her mouth. Without wanting to make a stereotypical *Once Were Warriors* comparison, instead I will say she quite resembles one of my sisters.

Ruka pulls out a caricatured long poi that she drags off towards the chair, in a simple transition that demonstrates her ability to hold the space well. Whirling blue-lit poi, the sound of the jackets metal zips clinking and her exertion turning itself into a pukana, she rips the poi open to throw confetti to (ironically) celebrate Key's victory speech.

The works in Late Night #2 reflect an evening of unease, dissatisfaction and potent symbols of destruction and transformation, from emerging voices willing to speak earnestly to these issues.

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