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Searching for some naked truths

MARY BRENNAN

February 16 2009

National Review of Live Art, Arches/Tramway, Glasgow

Some say "Arches!", seeing its dankly vaulted spaces as a properly underground heartland for this season's National Review of Live Art (NRLA). Others hanker for the white-walled airiness of Tramway, where NRLA was located for the past three years. Saturday's programme gave full houses the best of both worlds.

After 6pm, when the Arches turns its attention to clubbing, NRLA's artistic director, Nikki Milican, moved events over the river, where Tramway 1 (and its seating capacity) proved a useful environment for Ivana Muller's *While We Were Holding It Together* and Raimund Hoghe's *36, Avenue Georges Mandel*.

Muller (from Croatia) sets her five performers the kind of challenge we tinker with in childhood games: see how long you can hold a position, without moving. Arms outstretched, bodies twisted, staring straight ahead, they stay fixed, looking like ... what? We may have our own ideas, but Muller puts words into their mouths. Phrases beginning "I imagine ..." that flick switches in our own imaginations, so that the on-stage grouping suddenly forms a scenario. Then, new words and new possibilities. And a sly amount of well-timed humour. Blackout. Guess what? They haven't moved! (They will, when we stop expecting it.) The playfulness, like so much at NRLA, masks serious processes that question how we define ourselves and the world around us. Do we see what's there? Or what we're told is there? What happens when the stage is empty? In this case, we applaud enthusiastically at a tour de force of physical control and some very clever mind-games.

For Germany's Raimund Hoghe, the uncluttered openness of Tramway 1 accords with his own distinctive style - a slow, deliberately paced promenade that encounters significant objects, all neatly (you might say obsessively) laid out like shrines on a ritual progress. The divine diva that Hoghe evokes and celebrates (as he dons high heels and changes from glowing metallic clothes to drably anonymous grey) is Maria Callas. As her glorious voice surrounds us with arias of love - impassioned, unrequited, betrayed - Hoghe's visual vignettes create a parallel sense of his own life, likewise in thrall to art and beauty - and determined, with his hunched back, to challenge our perceptions of both. A complex piece, demanding a sustained concentration from the audience, but hugely memorable because of Hoghe's unswerving, unflinching honesty.

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POWERFUL: In a Thousand Pieces, a performative collage by The Paper Birds that tackles the issue of sex trafficking.

In between, Kate McIntosh caused a stampede of anticipation with *Loose Promise* in the smaller confines of Tramway 4. This is solo storytelling that soars and pounces, tickles you into hoots of laughter, then teases you to tears, with McIntosh's huskily persuasive voice luring you inside her jigsaw of incidents. She'd invited various writers to fashion text around some set images, then set herself the task of melding their responses into a panorama of identifiable fears, fantasies, urges and hidden-away secrets - all heightened by astutely selected objects and actions. All done with a lightness of touch that left you surprised at how intense, how powerful, this word-spinning was.

Earlier, at the Arches, the daily diary had heaved with difficult choices. But Helge Meyer's *Taschlich*, his naked body increasingly burdened with the stones of our guilt, was a remarkable metaphor for acts of tolerance, forgiveness and generous humanity. The Paper Birds provided a cogent reminder of those brutalised by sex trafficking with *In a Thousand Pieces*, a beautifully crafted performative collage that understood the power of small details to sear and linger in our minds and consciences.

Did we have secrets we'd like to forget? Sophia Yadong Hao drew on her Chinese heritage to offer *Vapour*, an installation where we whispered our guilty past into a mirror, then marked the breath before it vanished. Saturday itself has now gone: not a day, however, that one would want to forget.

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