

Published Date: 16 February 2009

By ANDREW EATON

\*\*\*

#### THE ARCHES, GLASGOW

AT ITS best, Scotland's annual live art festival offers unforgettable, genre-straddling shows you are unlikely to find anywhere else. At its worst, it asks you to endure unfocused, falling-badly-between-stools self-indulgence that you'd be unlikely to put up with anywhere else.

This year's first three days offered just about enough of the former to make up for the latter. Rosie Dennis, on Friday, was a revelation; an Australian artist who found a fascinating niche between performance poetry, dance and physical theatre with her show, No Entry. Captivating an audience with little more than a spotlight and one costume change, she spilled out a torrent of words, key phrases repeating and repeating as if she was sampling her own voice and playing it back, while her arms jerked and gestured to drive images home. Telling the story of two hard-working women who are, behind professional masks, desperately isolated, No Entry is gripping but elusive, dancing gracefully between possible meanings the way Dennis danced gracefully between genres.

No Entry made an illuminating contrast with Ireland's Aine Phillips on Wednesday. She offered poetry too, and an intriguing idea – a theatrical translation of a sixth-century text about The Art Of War, rewritten so it was about love. It promised an original take on sexual politics, but delivered a dull, uncharismatic poetry reading that would have a book festival crowd fleeing for the bars .

To be fair, you can't complain when a festival devoted to experiment offers an experiment that doesn't work, and with more than 20 events a day there is plenty else to see. In between the "shows" you can take time out in the installations, such as Billy Cowie's The Revery Alone, for which you lay on your back in a darkened room (cushion provided), don 3D glasses and watch a projection of a nimble, naked woman slowly stretching and rotating her body on the ceiling. Somehow it was equally therapeutic and erotic. Just down the corridor, meanwhile, Spain's Lesley Yendell was, over two days, building a room-sized sculpture out of flour – a beach covered in the mundane objects people leave behind.

Durational performances such as Yendell's can be the most rewarding things at NRLA; returning every few hours to watch this black-clad, sombre woman diligently sifting flour made me think of the mothers of the disappeared, guarding keepsakes of the presumed dead to preserve their memories. Wandering between other shows, it was inexplicably moving to know she was still there, in the Arches basement, continuing her ritual.

The following day the same space offered something as different from this as one could imagine, courtesy of artists in residence Hancock and Kelly – a naked, shaved, oiled man in a pig mask writhing to David Bowie's Heroes, which gradually slowed down over the course of two hours until it sounded like a demonic howl.

While the sheer range of experiences on offer is the main attraction of the NRLA, like any festival it has its headliner, and this one's was Franko B – festival-goers queued for hours on Friday to see his ten-minute performance. Franko B is a live art veteran, his CV is his body – tattooed head to toe, skin covered in self-inflicted scars. His show this year was beautifully simple – Franko, naked (yes, again, but he does it with more poetry than most) on a children's swing, smiling benevolently like a Buddha, a piano playing simple but melancholy music. Somehow, this poignant, dreamlike juxtaposition of hard-won experience and childhood innocence amounted

to way more than the sum of its parts. Like the best of NRLA, trying to describe or classify it does it no justice, but it lingered in the mind long afterwards.