

An Act of Now

Extra-terrestrial rave experience with brain-frazzling effects

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By Richard Watts



Cults. Conformity. Bullying. Ostracism. Enforced intimacy. The hothouse atmosphere of the *Big Brother* house, a barracks, a schoolyard, an over-crowded city. The fine line between terror and laughter. Anouk van Dijk's first work as Chunky Move's new Artistic Director evokes all these scenarios and more, in a vividly realised production which premiered last Thursday at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

An Act of Now begins with audience members being issued with headphones as they enter the grounds of the Bowl. It's through these headphones, which simultaneously distance us from our fellow audience members while reinforcing our common bond, that we hear Marcel Wierckx's compelling neo-industrial sound design, initially just an array of whispering voices: 'You have to ask permission... I don't know... I can't take responsibility for that, sorry'.

Later, once the dance proper has begun, the headphones also allow us to hear the amplified sounds of the dancers themselves; their grunts, gasps, footfalls and blows, their slaps, shouts and hysterical laughter. Take your headphones off and there's almost total silence. With them on, it's uncannily like eavesdropping on the apartment next door as your neighbours argue; an intimate act of surveillance, both voyeuristic and compelling.

After the audience has assembled at the top of a long slope, overlooking the city at dusk, a performer emerges from the gloaming and repeats many of the phrases we have just heard, reinforcing the work's thematic concerns about group-think, about obeying instructions and orders and fitting in. Then a siren wails, and we are led down into the Bowl proper, and seated on the stage around a smoke-filled glasshouse in which the dancers are arrayed. (This reviewer suggests audience members BYO cushions to counteract the uncomfortable seating banks.)

Inside the glasshouse the smoke begins to dissipate and the dancers initially strike a series of frozen gestures – crouching, huddled, bowed. They stand with hands behind heads like prisoners, or with fists clenched above their heads like a salute. One performer stands isolated in the corner while the remainder cluster in a group; the group reforms fluidly and another individual is cast out.

As the pace picks up, bodies slam against the walls, swing from the roof, roll across the floor. The intimate score becomes almost apocalyptic. Contorted faces scream against the glass, their exaggerated expressions emphasised by an exceptional lighting design. Sweeping gestures and controlled turns evoke a culture of control and concern, of constant negotiation and mutable personal boundaries. The diversity of the performers – a welcome alternative to the often homogenous Australian stage – suggests the world in miniature, trapped under glass. The dancers' whirling bodies, coupled with the bare metal frame of the house, generate tension and a palpable sense of risk.

An Act of Now is a genuinely exhilarating work; dynamic, vigorous, kinetic and thought provoking. It suggests the future of Chunky Move under Anouk van Dijk will be a very bright one indeed.

Rating: 4 stars out of 5