

## Melbourne Festival: An Act of Now

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*An Act of Now* is Anouk van Dijk's first work as the new artistic director of Chunky Move, and she has certainly arrived with a flourish. I've only **seen one other work of van Dijk's**: an extraordinary collaboration with the contemporary German playwright Falk Richter, *Trust*, at the 2011 Perth Festival. At the time, I was struck by the strangely oneiric effect of her choreography: her rhythms and movement often seem counter-intuitive, gracefulness turning back on itself to create complex, often violent, forms of collapse and reformation. As I was watching *Trust*, something in the movement of the dancers seemed to creep deep into my subconscious and inhabit it, in unsettling ways that felt akin, if not quite the same as, an experience of lucid dreaming. The same thing happened in *An Act of Now*, a completely different kind of work, which made me think that it wasn't simply an accident of my subjectivity.

*An Act of Now* - performed at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl - shows an inventiveness and boldness that really merits the word "risk". The performance begins as the audience is led through the darkness to the Myer amphitheatre. We are given headphones, which create an immediate sense of intimacy and - even more oddly, as they are also alienating - a feeling of communal purpose. We stand, like an invading army, on the lip of the bowl, looking down into the auditorium. The whispered soundtrack consists of instructions and admonitions that generate a pervasive sense of anxiety, which is reinforced by the police tape that marks out where we are supposed to go, and by the figure that emerges out of the darkness and distance, as if it is guiding aircraft into land. Behind it is another figure, perhaps dressed in a hazard suit, illuminated by harsh flashes, from which streams plumes of smoke. On the stage of the Bowl, those same flashes (part of Niklas Pajanti's extraordinary lighting design) illuminate what seems to be a glass house.

We are led to the seats on the stage, which face outwards over the auditorium. Before us is the glasshouse, filled so thickly with smoke that it is opaque: inside we see silhouettes, people moving close to the glass and then back into the house, vanishing into the haze. They are dressed casually, a group of young, contemporary bodies, posed with a slightly heightened formality. The greenhouse is claustrophobic, suffocating, an image at once of climate change, of urban interiority, of entrapment. The smoke gradually clears, but the sense of entrapment remains.

What follows is a dance that demonstrates the range of van Dijk's choreographic vocabulary: it slides from dance to violent, agonistic movement, vivid, passionate and with a real sense of danger. (A sense reinforced, on the opening night, when the dance

## Theatre Notes

had to be interrupted briefly because Stephanie Lake broke her wrist). Dancers sling each other across the stage, hang from the rafters of the house, confront each other, hit each other, seduce each other. A feeling of erotic excitement is palpable, a sense of irresistible physical vitality and vulnerability. The dancers are at once individuals - one of the pleasures of this piece is to see a cast which reflects how various people are, with differing ethnicities and body types - and wound into chains of togetherness, collapsing in strange, intricate ring-a-rosies, moving together with a harmony that sometimes seems inexplicable.

Marcel Weirckx's sound design mixes urgent electronic music with live sound; voices, the panting of the dancers, the amplified percussion of feet on the stage. The emotional effect is one of gathering intensity, generated by sequences which continuously break and reform into new patterns. And then, gloriously, release: one by one, the dancers escape from the house. We see them weaving through the seats of the auditorium and further out, over the grass, running through shadow and light to the far horizon, led by a dancer in a silver jacket playing a viola. It's a dance which seems at once ancient and absolutely contemporary: you think of the frolicking of young people at a music festival, of Brueghel's *Dance of Death*, of the line of souls in the final scene of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, of sudden delight and freedom. For all its darkneses and conflict, this is a joyous and hopeful work, utterly moving as a portrait of humanity.