

Performance

Girls at Work, Katie Duck and Yolande Snaith, Ivy Arts Centre, University of Surrey, Stag Hill, Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XH, 17 February 2016

Reviewed by Vincent Cacialano, Independent Artist.

Yolande Snaith and Katie Duck's *Girls at Work*, performed at University of Surrey this February (2016), was an evening-length performance that incorporated the use of objects, text, screen, sound and movement. Through a series of recent rehearsals and performances in Amsterdam and Berlin, the performers merged three previous versions of the work into one dance. In the work, one saw two performers approaching performance in different ways. Snaith, prepared and warm, filled the space with the image of a dinosaur made from blue rope, while Duck, improvised and irreverent, in a long black coat and dark glasses, began by playing solemnly at a piano. Although these images can immediately create different meanings and associations, in this performance, a sense of meaning often seemed to magically float or hang in the space between Duck and Snaith. Purpose or meaning was present, but it could not be pinned down through the associations often made in relation to the use of text or objects.

While I saw all the moments in the work as dance, for example the way the body moved during text delivery or the way pedestrian actions occurred, it was the more abstract solo movement moments and juxtaposition between the two women dancing that gave me the greatest 'sense' of what the work was dealing with: the politics of gender and age. The work's concern with these issues became most clear in the moments that were strongly focused on the body dancing.

Snaith and Duck's different approaches to performance and the materials developed created a whole picture of things placed next to one another through starkly designed spatial orientations, which at times intermeshed. The differences in presentation style and audience–performer relationship created a sense that the performers were being directly personal, being themselves as they are in the world; being *Girls at Work*. The performance title offered a humorous hint to the way these two performers engaged with gender politics in relation to performance. The piece seemed to take a stand itself in relation to 'girls at work'. For example, the work implicitly addressed and provoked the audience to think about issues such as the gender pay gap – an issue not mentioned often enough in the media, nor challenged stubbornly enough to change it.

On one level, these themes were where both characters connected by responding in different ways to one another: one more passively reflective through text and body language, sort of listening to the space, the other defiant, with moments of skulduggery and interjection. The combination was fantastic, and I felt it offered a sense of real-life-crosses-over-to-performance, as some of the text in the dance was a public iteration of real life situations and choices, of personal lived and embodied experience.

The body dancing seemed to address the ability to make choices through the dancers' approach to movement. In the work, there was a sense of what abstract dance offers: the dancing was not about what something means, but about what something is. It was shown at times by simply dancing in the field of gravity with all its flexing, extending, rotating, and composing in time.

As the work progressed, it seemed the two performers made one statement: that progress, in many ways, is not really taking place. While mentioned in a resigning chant or through a verbal proclamation, it was actually the concreteness, yet not necessarily easily

interpretable area of the here-and-now body and movement that often felt as if it transcended the more obvious signifiers of language. Paralinguistics filled the negative space of signs and symbols, allowing the body to articulate experience through movement. Here was where the work ventured into the concrete wildness of biology and nature. The dance was not read as only visual or auditory, but perceived by the proprioceptive senses, subtly yet concretely informing understanding through movement. The dancing felt as if it was beyond the quick fix of an academically honed meaning, engaging and challenging the audience to manage multiple possible meanings about the complexity of existence and experience.

The personal and real life subject matter that was performed in the dance was discussed further in the question and answer session that followed the performance. For example, Snaith explained that, although she perceived herself as youthful, in social settings, and especially in regards to technology, that perception dramatically changed (she jokingly referred to herself as a dinosaur). Duck's discussion was about herself as a woman, heartily living alone. She spoke about the social expectations of single women, for example, that, if they are to experience happiness, they need to have a partner – and asked audience members to reconsider the question of gender equality as though the issue was being asked for the first time. The vitality in Duck's voice offered a liberated 'storm of the bastille' perspective.

Duck and Snaith focused on the experience of ageing in less or more obvious ways in the dance, but the manner in which they dealt with the body itself in the work told us something about age, which I found especially interesting in relation to experiential knowledge. It offered an incredible perspective on what a dancer would hope to be able to do at any age. The dancing did not waste energy, showed body awareness, effortless efficiency and fluidity, and was very engaging. Here, it was definitely the body dancing that offered a lynchpin. Though ephemeral, it was the strongest and most concrete indicator to the meaning of the work, not as an object, but as an improvised space of fluctuation and flexibility. It seemed to allow affect to inform semiotics through the interplay of the dance and body composition in relation to the use of object and prepared text.

The work made me consider something I had read recently about how superficial muscle mass decreases as we age and the body searches for support in the skeleton and closer to the bone, relying much more on body-structure. The quality produced and that was visible in this dance, was that of an ethereal economy, where articulation happened deep in the centre of the joint with the spine connected and engaged in every gesture. Nothing was flat or peripheral.

Watching the performance on the University campus, surrounded by the sometimes exuberant and frenetic discussions of students, I humourously thought about a body's musculature, void of youthful impetuosity and extraneous effort or undirected energy. I considered the delicacy of proprioceptive and cognitive awareness and understanding through years of experience. I appreciated these two performers' awareness of the effect that neurons firing – in that potent place of performance for a gathered crowd – has on the body.

Watching the performers' bodies dancing, one could imagine the different roads a person might take in life. The wrinkles on their bodies seemed more like tattoos of experience.

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