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A Bold, Beautiful Beckett

May 23, 2014

7:12 PM MST



Arcane Collective's *Return to Absence*
Morleigh Steinberg

Return to Absence by Arcane Collective

Rating: ★★★★★

In some respects it's difficult to categorize Arcane Collective's current production, *Return to Absence*. Certainly there's [dance](#), with Japanese Butoh very much in evidence. Yet certain segments could equally be considered performance art. Indeed, the overall feel is quite theatrical and, at times, almost cinematic. What cannot be in doubt however is that *Return to Absence* is a bold and beautiful production, one which is extraordinarily moving, meticulously articulated and perfectly executed.

Inspired by Beckett's trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, *Return To Absence* presents a wonderful dichotomy of moods and movements articulated with flawless precision. Light contrasts with shadow, humor with a sense of weight and burden, distance with fleeting moments togetherness. Unbearably painstaking articulations contrast with moments of wild spinning, wrestling and chasing with chairs. Throughout, the beautiful articulated shapes and patterns re-present the human body as something frail, contorted and weary, yet capable of

extraordinary beauty.

While contrasts abound, execution and articulation are singularly flawless and at all times riveting. Dancers Oguri, Boaz Barkan and Andrés Corchero each give wonderfully executed performances, achieving an extraordinary sense of both intimacy and distance. Dressed in long coats and bowler hats for much of the time, they create almost cinematic moments on occasion. From the opening sequence, where a contorted hand reaches around the curtain, Nosferatu like, and drags it open lit by a single spot, to the hilarious fight sequence, Beckett's love of silent movies is very much in evidence. But it is their skillful and precise movements throughout which capture attention, expressing the richness of humanity with its struggles, sorrows and slapstick.

With *Return to Absence*, director and choreographer Morleigh Steinberg gives a master class in precision. Every movement, every nuance is scrupulously articulated, right down to the opening and closing of eyelids. Pace and rhythm is managed expertly, beginning with a painstakingly slow opening which builds carefully to moments of wild whirling before returning to an almost meditative stillness for the final sucking of stones sequence. Costumes by Grace O'Hara evoke Beckett perfectly and the minimal set design by Moses Hacmon and Oguri is given richness and depth by Morleigh Steinberg's evocative lighting design. Composer, Paul Chavez, creates an astonishingly rich soundscape, layered with music, sounds and voices, the latter provided by the vocal talents of Gavin Friday and Olwen Fouère.

Beckett aficionados will find much to enjoy here. Yet those unfamiliar with Beckett should not be deterred. While *Return to Absence* pays respectful homage to Beckett, in many respects Beckett provides a jumping off point from which Arcane Collective have created a work uniquely their own. *Return to Absence* is perfectly realised, visually arresting and deeply moving, appealing to all lovers of dance, theatre and performance. The only cloud in an otherwise perfect sky is its short, three nights run. This is a show that demands and deserves to be seen. It can only be hoped that it makes a welcome return soon.

Return to Absence - The [Project Arts Centre](#), May 21st -23rd as part of The Dublin Dance Festival 2014



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