

Critical Dance, 19 September 2013

By David Mead

The end is daringly haunting and poetic. Merle Hensel's revolving set turns again and again like a slow motion merry-go-round. There is an air of sadness as the characters that have become so familiar over the preceding two hours wave, embrace and weep as they glide pass. It's a startling end to Jasmin Vardimon's "Justitia" (Latin for 'justice'), a powerful, emotionally charged and quite outstanding piece of dance theatre.

The work centres on the trial for murder of Mimi, accused of killing Seth, her husband Charlie's best friend. During an evening watching football on the TV, Charlie went out to get some beers from the local store, leaving Mimi and Seth at home. When he got back, Seth was dead on the carpet. It was certainly Mimi who killed him. But was it self-defence, murder or accident? What really happened? And why?

Over two hours, Vardimon leads us through a series of variations on the possible events of the fateful evening. The fragility of truth is exposed as what seems clear suddenly becomes very uncertain, with a particularly unexpected surprise at the end. She involves the audience in a way that is very rare in dance. From the very opening, when we see the court stenographer typing away, with the text appearing on the all above her, she pulls you in. Vardimon makes you wonder about events and care about those involved. She even gives the audience a role, as we all effectively become jurors.

Text by writer Rebecca Lenkiewicz, largely spoken by the impressive Mafalda Deville as Mimi's defence lawyer, forms the foundation for the work, but is then developed and illuminated through highly physical dance. In doing so, each character is constructed, then slowly and deliberately taken apart piece by piece, their fears, despairs, frustrations and other inner demons exposed for all to see.

There are a few moments when taking in the movement and the stenographer's text above is difficult, but on the whole the effect works well. It certainly helps the storytelling along. It's a simple typing slip, but accidentally inserting a space into Seth's occupation, she temporarily turns him into "the rapist," perhaps a clue to why Mimi killed him. The dance and acting sections work supremely well together. They are at their best when in conversation, the dance responding to the spoken word and vice-versa. Vardimon shifts the mood between horror and humour with ease. She never allows things to get too busy. The work is beautifully paced, with a return to the stenographer used frequently as a device to slow things down and give you time to think and reflect.

The movement is typically in Vardimon's athletic, energetic style. There are highlights aplenty. The early playfighting dance between Seth and Charlie that takes place on and around the sofa is intensely acrobatic and filled with split-second timing. Other memorable moments are more concerning, notably Deville's interrogation of Mimi's neighbour (a woman but played by male dancer Estéban Fourmi) during which the lawyer kicks and pushes her victim into increasingly uncomfortable and exaggerated positions.

The cast all proved their versatility as actor-dancers. At the heart of everything, Aoi Nakamura was outstanding. She was totally believable whether playing Mimi as a scheming murderer or accidental victim of an action taken in self-defence. There was certainly no holding her back as the sexually-starved woman when she stripped off and threw herself at Paul Blackman's Seth with gusto. As the victim, Blackman is perhaps the one person we don't feel sorry for. He is loud and annoying. He constantly pops up and interrupts. In his therapy sessions he is particularly manic, bullying his patients in a superficially cheery, yet ultimately cruel way. Estéban's neighbour and court witness is also compelling as he totters around not unlike one of the characters in Pina Bausch's "Café Muller."

Hensel's set rotates every now and then, this allowing the action to switch from the court to Mimi and Charlie's living room on the night in question, to their neighbour's apartment. One of the dividing walls has chairs slotted into holes, on which the dancers climb, hang and dance around. When the chairs are absent, shafts of light blaze through, each one looking like a sword: perhaps the swords of justice, perhaps the proverbial sword hanging over the accused's head.