

**Totaltheatre.com, May 2009**

★★★★★

By Janet Dowling

---

Justitia, Lady Justice, is dance, physical theatre and a courtroom drama with a strong, spoken narrative. The audience are addressed as the jury; we decide whether or not Mimi is innocent as she and the other characters reveal conflicting aspects of themselves while the stage revolves between three locations where parallel action, backing stories, and the characters' feelings unfold.

The high production value of the set and lighting is due the way it is used symbolically as a surrealistic carousel representing the atmosphere and momentum of the piece. At the same time it allows the staging to use the audiences' experience of how time is conveyed in films. We're used to flashbacks, being able to freeze frames, rewind and revisit stories as animations and caricature. The chiaroscuro lighting of Noir films is used too. All of these techniques in Justitia had the audience laughing and sometimes cheering as they recognized the tragicomic nature of this murder given as courtroom evidence and played out as a range of possible scenarios. Did she kill him? Was she raped? Did her husband do it? Why did his friend, the group therapist Seth Marvel, spend so much time at their flat watching football and drinking beer? What about the main witness, a transvestite neighbour with a very nervous disposition?

On the night I saw the production, a lot of the audience was younger, and very responsive to the techniques used to integrate the drama with dance and a filmic musical score which included Johnny Cash's version of , "Bridge over Troubled Water".

Dance itself remains essential and integral to the production. The only other company I've seen where the dancers use such a lot of original movement and sequencing is Merce Cunningham's troupe. What he and Jasmin Vardimon have in common is that they allow the dancers to improvise a lot of the movement themselves while encouraging them to step outside of learned balletic shapes and gesture. The result is that a lot more everyday movement, street dance and martial arts technique is rendered highly expressive in their work. Where they differ markedly is in their use of narrative. Cunningham's work is entirely without narrative, while Vardimon uses story fully to develop her ideas.

Given the originality of the production, it was worth getting there early to read the programme. Instead of giving professional biographies of the dancers/actors, their responses to questions about how the performance was devised is recorded. Yunkrung Song researched her role as Mimi by reading about Ruth Ellis, the last person to be hanged in the UK. Paul Blackman based his character, the group therapy leader, on Tom Cruises' performance in Magnolia. He comforts his clients, the players within the courtroom drama, by explaining that it's OK for all of them to feel guilty as only sociopaths are without guilt.

In this way, the characters' backing stories allow the production to explore two key situations in which we are conditioned to expect truth and actuality to be revealed.

The Peacock Theatre, with its spacious bar areas, is a good venue to check regularly if you want to explore the popular influences on dance performance. At ten to twenty pounds a ticket Jasmin Vardimon's Justitia was excellent value for money: a must-see dance company. 5/5