

Lullaby, 2005

By Mairead Turner

Choreographer and director Jasmin Vardimon has a special propensity for brutal honesty and uncomfortable truths. Her work illuminates the way that society and its institutions deal with the underbelly of our experiences, instabilities and sicknesses.

Lullaby is for me a heart-wrenching study of people in crisis operating within a controlled system terrifyingly bigger than any of us. The set is a series of hospital curtains which deftly transform the performance space into waiting room, ward, staff room and operating theatre. The locations are populated by patients, loved ones, doctors and nurses who are, in turn, embodied by a five-strong ensemble of incredibly virtuosic dancers. If nurses are portrayed as neurotics, with comic tics of the neck and harangued smiles, the doctors seem sleazily voyeuristic. During an examination one doctor wears a tiny video camera, allowing us to view the patient's body projected onto a screen in uncomfortably extreme and lingering close-up. In another scene a doctor manipulates a seemingly unconscious, doll-like dancer, a transgressive encounter so disturbing in its connotations of rape and its unnerving power that I feel the audience sitting motionless, its collective breath drawn in, appalled yet transfixed.

In another scene a doctor delivers an authoritative lecture, explaining that sometimes it becomes necessary to attack the disease and, therefore, the body in the hope that the former will be destroyed and the latter recover. While speaking he repeatedly attacks a nurse, demonstrating his metaphor by grappling her to the floor and nearly suffocating her with a pillow. The child-like violence of his actions has a distinctly dark, surreal humour when set against the calm words of his scientific discourse.

Jasmin depicts with heart-wrenching accuracy an organisation which should serve and heal us, repair our broken, damaged, aged or diseased bodies and send us back to our loved ones. She makes us face the uneasy hyper-reality of an institution governed by doctors who are portrayed as abusive, cold and clinical, who violate and transgress their patients' bodies in inappropriately sexualised and grossly disrespectful ways. The interactions are both de-personalised and over-personalised.

Jasmin's view could be interpreted as harsh. I want to be balanced. I know that there are many good doctors and nurses who truly want to help people. And yet if contemporary dance reflects the body within society, there is surely no more poignant reflection on both than a diseased body in decline and hospitalised. In the UK we have a one in three chance of being diagnosed with cancer. For many of us the huge, mortality-battling dramas brought out by this or some other major illness is usually staged not in a familiar environment or our own communities, but in the often unavoidable institution of a hospital. It is the frame for a series of processes that must happen according to the doctor's synopsis. It provides a structure and a locale where treatment is inevitable. I feel so glad, so warmed, that in Lullaby Jasmin is able to reflect on the common reality of this place. Even as Jasmin was researching and creating it, I was witnessing a slow spreading of cancer amongst friends who began nursing their way through its unswerving course as it ate away at their parents. My friends were sleepwalking through a haze of pain, confusion, disbelief and terror at their mothers or fathers decline, at the fragility of life and their own powerlessness. I watched, listened and felt silenced by the overwhelming taboo of illness and death. Suddenly cancer was omnipotent.

Conversing with these friends taught me a new way of talking, an inherited doctoring of language. The cause and effect of radiotherapy, chemotherapy and endless operations, the tumours spreading through colonised body parts and organs, took precedence over the personality of the parent. This essentially human element seemed to slowly disappear, replaced by a new, abstract and biological identity.

Jasmin made Lullaby as a reaction to losing her father to cancer and she has dedicated this piece to him. Two friends, both of whom also lost parents to cancer, saw Lullaby and found the experience to be profound and uplifting.

I've written these thoughts as everything I feel I am when I've watched Lullaby: Jasmin's ongoing fan and former company manager; the friend of a surgeon, a medic and a nurse; a witness to others grief and a daughter aware of the possibility that I may some day need to deal with the passing of my own loved ones; and a woman increasingly aware of her own mortality. Filtered through this odd litany of roles, Lullaby moves me deeply and triggers so many questions. I wonder why people lose the right to experience their own deaths as they choose,

why we continue to operate on those who have a small chance of survival, and just who has choice and control when a loved one is facing serious illness? I fear the haunting nature of these and other questions, but Lullaby reassures me that they are valid.

Reading this you may be thinking, 'My god, do I really want to sit through this show?' And yet I so want people to see Lullaby. It's funny, beautiful, real, moving, important and radical. It features accomplished, highly skilled dancers who have learnt their craft over long periods of research, development and rehearsal and during a tour which is hitting its sixtieth date (virtually unheard of in dance on this scale). Lullaby also has a somewhat Brit-pop feel of young, incredibly talented artists collaborating, and using cutting-edge video projection and animation to surprising and satisfying effect.

Jamsin's work seems to me to be the epitome of contemporary dance. How old-fashioned so much else that goes by that name seems in comparison. It's one of those works of art that stays with you, that makes you realise that dance can be political and entertaining, and that it can speak about things with a depth and profundity words alone can't reach.